

INTERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

A Smith

INFERNO!

SINCE ITS inception over six years ago, one of Inferno!'s roles has been to develop the next generation of fantasy and SF authors and unleash them onto an unsuspecting world. It's all part of a grand tradition that dates back to the early twentieth century where pulp magazines would be the natural outlet for an author's first work before progressing onto novel writing.

Look at the fantasy and SF section in your local bookstore and you'll see book after book written by authors whose first works appeared in magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Analog*. Conan creator, Robert E Howard, took this path as did Isaac Asimov (who would later go on to publish his own short SF fiction magazine), Alfred Bester, Frederick Pohl and almost every other genre fiction writer working in the middle part of the last century.

I have to say that in terms of uncovering new talent, I think Inferno! has done pretty well down the years.

Hands up if any of you have read *Crossfire*? Matt Farrer's first ever published work appeared in the pages of Inferno! *Blood Money*? C.L Werner is another writer who got his first big break

here. *Soul Drinker*? Yep, you've guessed it – Ben Counter's first published work was with us.

As the editor of Inferno! I see this as being a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside to see the name of somebody we've coaxed, cuddled and cajoled over the years on the cover of a novel. The flipside is that because a novel is a far more time-consuming piece of work than a short story, I constantly have to replenish the stable of Inferno! writers.

In the past few issues we've seen the debut of several new and talented writers. Mitchel Scanlon, no doubt familiar to Warhammer Monthly readers as the creator of both Hellbrandt Grimm and Liliana Falcone, turned his talented hands to prose to great effect on two occasions. I for one can't wait to see what he does with his third Inferno! short, *The Seventh Boon*. BL staffers Darius Hinks and Matt Ralphs have had their first stories published – Darius is currently working on his second while Matt has been busy writing the Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer, which should be in your local branch of Games

Workshop now (is that a good enough plug, Matt?). Andy Hoare of Games Workshop's games development team got in on the act as well with a Space Wolves thirteenth company story that was a direct tie-in to this year's Eye of Terror worldwide campaign.

THIS ISSUE we have two brand new writers, and another making the step across from comic book scripting, for your delight and delectation. Debutant number one, Nick Kyme, takes us to Tilea for the tale of *The Perfect Assassin* while number two, Rob Sanders, takes us on a voyage to the Sea of Chaos on the trail of a mutated whale in *The Cold Light of Day*. Jim Alexander on the other hand, revisits Abaddon's thirteenth black crusade in *Plague Ship*, a savage tale of Doom Eagle Marines taking on a vile plague zombie horde.

Look out for more stories from these guys and more fabulous new authors in forthcoming issues.



Christian Dunn
Editor

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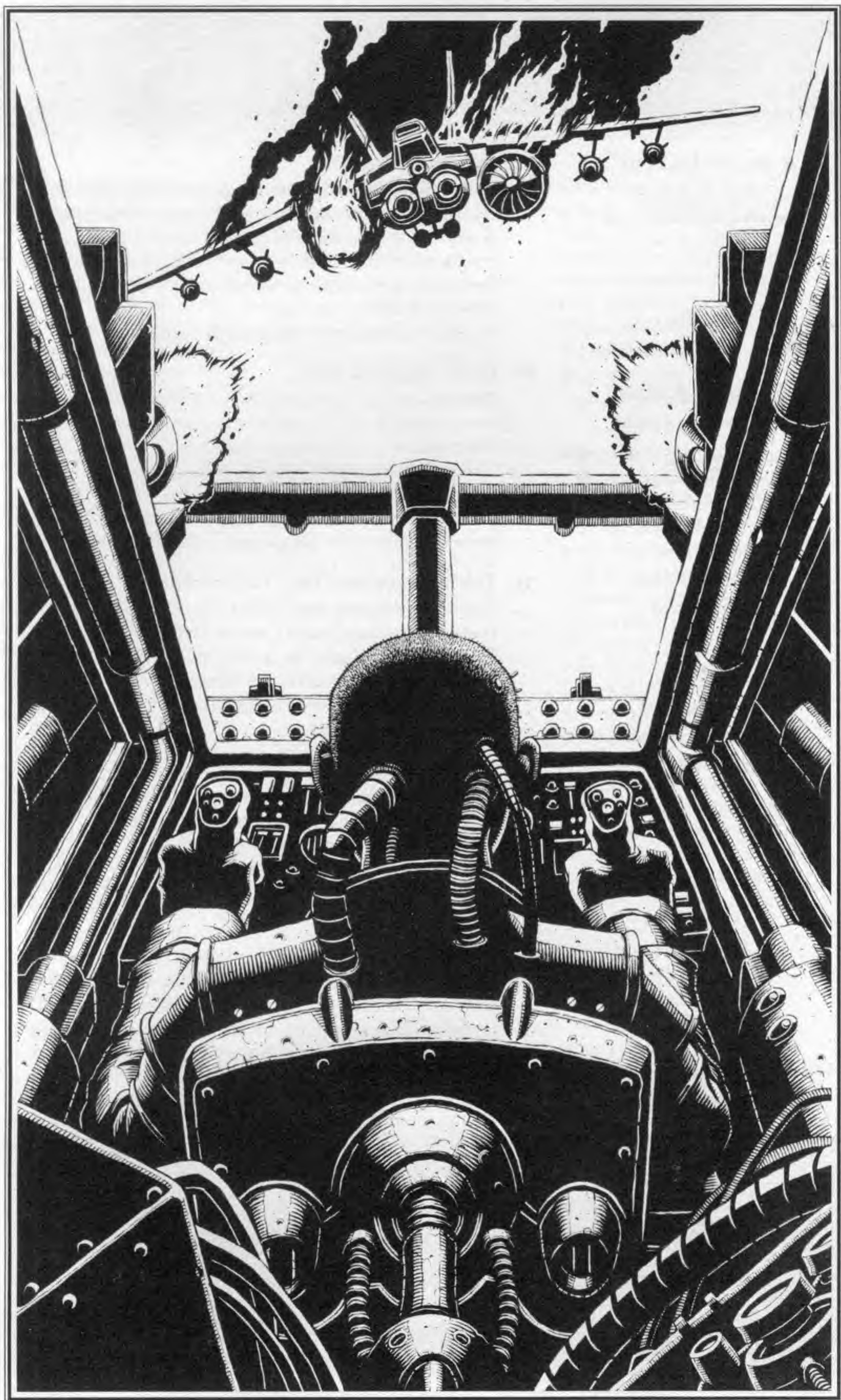
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WINGS OF BONE

by
James
Swallow

AVES LIKED TO speak to *Griffon*. He made sure that the rest of the crew were not around when he did, lest their opinion of him sink any lower. The one occasion he'd been caught crooning to the machine, it had led – typically – to a punishment beating from Nilner. Aves thought about the hulking thug as he sat in the big gunnery officer's chair, the same knot of impotent hate he always felt for the bully tightening in his chest.

He ran an oilcloth over the triggers of the twin bolter cannons, wiping away the accumulated sweat and grease. 'Just right,' he told *Griffon*. 'Good enough for the Emperor himself.'

Aves took the controls in his hands and placed his feet on the pedals. He felt at home there, nestled in the cupola across the shoulders of *Griffon's* fuselage. To his left and right, the wings of the Marauder class bomber extended away, blunt leading edges pitched like the blades of a double-headed axe. A white design of the plane's mythic namesake was drawn there, close to a rendering of the double-headed eagle of the Imperium. The cowling of the engines made the bomber's profile more muscular at the wing roots, the massive motors silent now, but powerful enough to lift the forty-tonne flyer and a full payload into high orbit.

Aves pressed a pedal and the turret made a slow circuit; he grinned as it rotated quietly and smoothly. Staring out past the upturned barrels of the bolters, Aves watched the stubby t-shaped tail swing by, and beneath it, Stoi's posting. The albino tailgunner never told Aves if he was satisfied with the crewman's maintenance on his station, preferring to hover on the edge of things, quiet and sinister. The flight crew nicknamed Stoi 'The Ghost', but Aves was convinced he was something far more sinister: an agent

of the Inquisition, maybe. He smothered a flare of irritation, remembering Nilner's braying laughter when he had voiced this fanciful suggestion.

The turret rotated over the prow of the bomber where Captain Vought's cockpit was, with the twin lascannon turret beyond. Aves looked down at the captain's acceleration couch with barely concealed desire. He wanted so badly to settle into that chair, to feel the potency of *Griffon* through the flight yoke in his hands, and the need was like a guttering flame inside him, forever burning. But the daydreams that had spurred him into volunteering for duty in the Imperial Navy had not helped him qualify for aircrew status.

Aves felt a familiar mood, black and dolorous, threaten to overcome him. He'd lost count of the number of times he had tried and failed the flight status exam, and it was his own awkwardness and clumsy nature that kept him forever grounded, forced to work as a maintenance hand on the flyers that captivated him. Naval Crewman 3rd Class Bryn Aves was doomed to remain grounded.

Unbidden, his hand strayed to the breast of his tunic, where a unit patch for the 404th squadron was fixed. Aves coveted the bone white wings that flight crewmen wore, and for the thousandth time, he wondered what it would be like to wear them himself.

A glitter of light in the sky distracted him from his thoughts. Low on the horizon a flashing dart moved closer, catching a flicker of orange light from the sunset. Aves licked his lips; he was positive that no aircraft was due to arrive at the base. *Griffon* and her squadron had returned a few hours ago, fresh from another in a line of inconsequential attacks on the heretic forces. In a rare

piece of luck they had suffered no losses, so this was not some straggler limping back. He shifted the turret toward the approaching object – much nearer now – and Aves could identify it as a Lightning, a Naval fighter.

The crewman's heart pounded as the turret's auspex brought the fighter into blurry life on a targetting screen. The Lightning turned, hopping the line of trees at the base perimeter. It was too low to be detected by scanners, skimming the ground. For an moment, the flyer was fixed in the turret's gun cues and Aves saw clearly where the Imperial aquila had been struck off its wings and daubed over by a many angled star.

'Heretic!' The word almost choked him. The crewman's mind whirled; it was clearly a suicide attacker, probably loaded with munitions, and most likely followed the 404th back from the battle to inflict some payback. On it came, and still the air raid siren did not sound. The captured Lightning powered over the runway.

Aves found his hands moving without conscious volition, instinctively flicking off the safety catches on the heavy bolters. The red glyph in the firing window appeared and Aves pulled the guns up to bead the target.

Words tumbled from his trembling lips, 'Emperor guide me, I implore you.'

If the heretic pilot saw the movement from the parked Marauder, it was of no consequence, time seemed to slow to a crawl as Aves gripped the twin triggers and squeezed. The bolters crashed into life and spat thick rounds into the air, bullets as big as candlepins cutting through the sky, shell cases arcing away in a glittering fountain of brass. The Lightning flashed over the bomber and the bolts raked its belly like predatory claws cutting into prey. Aves spun in the turret chair to see the stricken fighter flip over and smash straight into the ground. The airframe crumpled like paper under the impact, detonating in a yellow flash.

Griffon rocked on its landing gear from the shock and Aves lost his sight for a few moments, flash-blinded. He heard voices and footsteps scrambling through the

bomber. Blinking, he looked up to see a huge man shape towering over him. Nilner. It seemed a miracle that the big gunner could even begin to fit his massive frame inside the cupola.

'I got him–' Aves began, fear and elation mixing in his voice.

Nilner cut him off, grabbing a fistful of his tunic and tearing him out of the chair. Before he could protest, Aves was thrown down into the hull, landing hard on his back. Breath gushed out of him and he tried to lift himself back up. In the poorly lit interior of the bomber he saw only shadows as Nilner's heavy boot struck him in the ribs. The gunnery officer picked him up again and pitched the crewman out of the egress hatch. Aves tasted blood in his mouth as he fell in a heap on the black ferrocrete runway.

Aves managed to raise his head, and there he saw Captain Vought and the rest of *Griffon's* crew, breathless from running, framed by the burning wreckage of the heretic Lightning.

'Sir?' Aves managed.

Vought watched him with cold dispassion; then Nilner was there, hauling him up to his feet like a rag doll.

'Don't ever use my guns, dullard!' Nilner growled.

Aves wanted to protest, but the next punch sent him reeling and consciousness fled. The last thing he saw was Vought, expressionless as he watched Nilner take the crewman's impertinence out of his hide.



THE MEDICAL corpsman gave Aves something for the swelling and told him to get lost. The infirmary had its share of real injuries and a crewman's damaged face wasn't worth more than a few seconds of care. Pressing a bandage to the cut on his cheek, Aves began the walk back to the barracks. Night had fallen, revealing a star-dappled sky. The crewman glanced up; bright dots

overhead signified the positions of warships, moving slowly between the glow of stars. He liked the nights on Rocene. The planet seemed to grow more reverent and docile in the dark and he somehow felt safer there than in the brightness of day. Aves found it easier to hide at night.

He stopped at the service road to let a Chimera grumble past, following the vehicle with his gaze as it trundled toward the hangars. Beyond them, he could just make out the faint tracery of the perimeter fence; and beyond that was the horizon, lit with a faint glow.

The heretics were there. The vast mechanised army that the apostate rebels had created was rolling ever closer with each passing day, sacking towns and torching cities to the ground as they went. Aves had heard rumours from old Dolenz in the tower about how the beleaguered Imperial Guard was being forced to surrender kilometre after kilometre to the oncoming insurrectionists. The missions of the Marauder squadrons from here at Point November base were meant to support the Guardsmen's efforts, but they seemed to have little success in halting the tide of the advance. The crews were sombre and terse and the failed suicide attack would not improve matters.

Aves passed the black scar in the ground where the Lightning had crashed. Whatever remained of the turncoat fighter had been hastily concealed under tarps, all of them emblazoned with the sigils of the Inquisition and dire warnings not to approach. He spotted *Griffon's* navigator, Kheed, nearby in conversation with one of the Guardsmen standing post by the wreck.

Aves made sure he did not make eye contact with him. Although he and Kheed were the same age, the arrogant young officer was everything Aves was not. A high born caste member from a hive world, the navigator looked down his nose at everyone but the captain, and strutted about Point November as if he expected a command of his own to appear by the Emperor's grace. Kheed made no secret of the fact he thought of the

crewman as less than a servant. Aves hated him almost as much as he hated Nilner.

Aves walked on past the fighter he had destroyed. The momentary elation he had felt at striking a blow against Terra's enemies was gone now, it had faded like a distant memory. In its place remained only the dull pain from where Nilner had repeatedly struck him. It seemed that despite his actions, Aves still had no leniency to come after breaking the rules, and Nilner had been very clear on many occasions that Aves was not worthy to man a post aboard *Griffon*. The gunner seemed to have made it his life's work to victimise him, and the other junior crewmen were content to let it happen, rather than risk being the target of the officer's ire themselves. Aves kept to the shadows, hoping to avoid another confrontation with the gunner, slipping through pools of dark cast by the officers' quarters.

'-Aves.'

He froze as he heard his name spoken aloud. The voice came from Captain Vought's private quarters. Aves moved closer and recognised the deep tones of Sorda, *Griffon's* bombardier and Vought's second-in-command. The crewman crouched down, afraid of discovery, but equally afraid of missing something vital in the conversation.

Inside the captain's hut, Sorda was helping himself to a brackish local brandy from Vought's private store. 'You must admit he displayed quick thinking.'

Vought said nothing, and arched an aristocratic eyebrow in response. Sorda downed the drink in one jolt. In the half-light of the room, the bombardier's bald head seemed to shine, the glow of the lamp glittering off the steel on his temple and his bulbous, bionic eye.

'Crewmen are not trained to think,' Vought said, his rich core-world accent adding gravity to every word. 'Aves has ideas above his station. He must understand that the Emperor places his servants where they are needed, not where they want to be.'

'You would rather he had let the heretic pass unchallenged?' Sorda eyed the brandy bottle but thought better of it. 'You may be correct, but why do you let Nilner treat the poor fool as a whipping boy? Aves does his job well, yet that thug berates and abuses him at every opportunity. And you allow it to go on.'

Vexation flickered on Vought's face; he was not one to encourage the questioning of his orders. 'Sorda, there are many other captains who would see your behaviour as insubordinate. Do you know why I tolerate your familiarity?'

The bombardier was not cowed. 'Because you owe me your life twice over? Because we flew through hell together at the Tellus Marches and Ogre IV?'

Vought allowed himself the smallest of smiles. 'No, Sorda. It is because that bionic eye of yours makes you the best bombardier in the squadron. But sometimes I wonder if you see a little too much with it.'

Sorda shrugged. 'What I see is a poor wretch that the crew consider a joke of a man, a failure who lacks the spine to be a true soldier of the Emperor... And yet, when he serves the Imperium he is punished for it.'

The captain's expression went cold again. 'Griffon has the finest combat rating in the 404th, because I allow my men to do what they will as long as that battle record stays unblemished.' He poured a little of the brandy for himself. 'Nilner is a thug and a bully, but he keeps the gun crew in line. To maintain that, I'd let him beat Aves all day if need be. Only the mission matters, Sorda. If you ever lose sight of that, I'll put you off my crew.'

Outside, Aves held his breath. Sorda had never spoken anything but clipped orders to him since he had been assigned to *Griffon*, and it surprised him to think the officer might actually show some compassion. He was still turning this over in his mind when a strident voice cried out his name, startling him.

'What are you loitering around here for?' Aves spun on his heel to confront Weslund, *Griffon's* lascannon gunner. His sallow face was set with annoyance, and

he gestured sharply at the crewman with his free hand, the other gripping a volume of Ministorium doctrine. Weslund advanced menacingly, the light of zealotry flaring in his eyes. 'Spying, perhaps? Listening and skulking?'

Aves realised that the gunner must have just returned from his regular prayers at the base's tiny chapel. Weslund was extremely pious and fervent in his devotion to the Golden Throne, given to seeing the taint of heresy in every corner.

'I was just walking...' Aves fumbled at an answer, eyes downcast.

'Lies trip off your tongue so easily!' Weslund snapped.

The door to Captain Vought's quarters opened, revealing *Griffon's* commander and Sorda. 'What is the meaning of this?' Vought's voice cut like an icy scalpel.

Weslund spoke before Aves could even think. 'I discovered him hiding outside your door, sir, eavesdropping.'

Vought gave Aves a hard stare. 'Is this true, crewman?'

Aves shook his head, his cheeks reddening, unable to speak.

'Nilner was too lenient with him, captain. The fool is corrupted, I'm sure of it. He should be shot as a traitor!'

'Weslund, Aves shot down a suicide flyer. He's no heretic,' Sorda said. The lasgunner's manner exasperated the bombardier.

'Perhaps. Perhaps not. He may have been trying to silence-'

'Enough of this prattle!' Vought growled. 'While I admire your zeal in searching for immorality, you will not find it among my crewmen, Mister Weslund. Understand?'

The gunner closed his mouth with an audible snap and nodded.

'As for you, crewman,' Vought flicked a glance at Sorda, 'if you were listening at my door, you'll take another hiding from Nilner in punishment.'

Aves felt the blood drain from his face, seeing Nilner in his mind's eye, the big man grinning as he laid into him.

'Captain, if I may,' Sorda broke in, tapping his bionic eye. 'If Aves had been loitering outside, I would have seen his heat trace with my optics.' He made a show of looking around. 'I saw no such trace,' Sorda lied.

Vought gave the bombardier a measuring look, then nodded. 'Very well. You men are dismissed. We have a mission at dawn and I expect you to be ready.' The captain slammed shut the door of his cabin and Weslund took the cue to walk away, giving Aves a lingering sneer as he shouldered past him.

After a moment, Sorda addressed Aves in a quiet voice. 'You did well today, lad, but take some advice. Keep to yourself. You'll live longer.'

Aves nodded jerkily. Sorda's were the first words of encouragement he could ever remember hearing from a superior officer.



THE INTERIOR OF Point November's operations bunker was dingy and grim, an array of seated men gazing into auspex screens or buried in scanner hoods. In the centre of the room was a chart table sporting a map covering the whole of the peninsula around the base. Even from a few feet away, Aves could see that the red tide of markers denoting heretic forces was slowly consuming the Imperial held zone. A tactical officer moved a set of symbols closer to the enemy line, the tags represented the 404th's bombers.

'Aves, lad,' Dolenz beckoned him over. 'Don't stand in the way there.'

The crewman did as he was asked. Dolenz gave him a weak smile as he approached. Aves forced himself not to look below the old man's waist; where his legs should have been there were two spindly bionic replacements. Their steel exteriors made them seem like arcane metal bones grafted from an iron skeleton. The sight of Dolenz's disability always made Aves feel uncomfortable, but the old soldier seemed not to notice. He handed

Dolenz a small jar of machine lubricant, secreted from the aircraft stores.

'Here you are. Enough for another few weeks.'

Dolenz took the jar with a crack-toothed smile and daubed a little of the fluid on his leg joints. 'Good boy. I'd have rusted stiff long ago if not for you.'

Aves looked around, listening to the mumbled litany of battle prayer and communications chatter. 'How goes the mission?'

Dolenz nodded at his auspex screen, the green display shimmering like a tank of stagnant water. 'Close now. *Griffon* is on target, with *Basilisk* in support.'

Aves took this in with a nod. *Basilisk* was Captain Marko's Marauder, a good crew with a record almost equalling *Griffon's*. He rubbed a hand over his brow; it was blood-warm in the bunker and the crewman was sweating.

'I heard what you did last night,' Dolenz said. 'Terra be proud, you were sharp and no mistake.'

'I was just lucky.'

'Luck?' The old soldier's face screwed up in dismay. 'No such thing. Some say I was lucky when I got shot down and lived to tell the tale.' He tapped a finger on his metal legs. 'I don't call having these pieces of iron welded to me lucky.' Dolenz gave a heavy sigh. 'Matters little, anyway. We'll quit this piece of dirt soon enough.'

Aves gave him a quizzical look. 'What do you mean?'

'You wouldn't have heard, would you?' The sensor operator looked around to see if any officers were listening to their conversation. 'There's talk, lad. A retreat is in the offing. We'll give up this forsaken piece of turf and let the Astartes take the lead instead.'

'Space Marines? Here? But what about the base?'

Dolenz shrugged. 'Probably be abandoned. If the rumours are true, mind.'

Aves tried to assimilate this new piece of information. The sudden idea of the unknown left him with a jumble of excitement and fear.

'Here, lad, it's starting,' hissed Dolenz, as the comm channels came to life. 'They're in sight of the mark.'

'Point November base, *Griffon*,' Vought's voice issued out of the air. 'Commencing attack.'



CLOUDS OF FLAK thrown up from guns on the ground burst about *Griffon* in dark spheres of smoke, opening like deadly black poppies. Vought dismissed them, concentrating on steering the fully-laden Marauder through streams of bright red tracer, spat into the sky from Hydra anti-aircraft batteries that had been captured by heretic units. Every few moments, a brilliant white flash on the ground signalled the launch of a massive Manticore missile, prompting the captain to trigger a flare shell or chaff cylinder from a control on his yoke. Vought could see the ground as a seething carpet of armoured vehicles and enemy soldiers, all of them pouring weapons fire into the bomber's path. The air was his medium, and he was master of it, powering the massive tonnage of the Marauder through the flak and into the kill zone.

'*Griffon*, *Basilisk*. Your three o'clock low,' Captain Marko's voice said in his ear. 'I have the lead.'

'Copy, *Basilisk*. We'll follow you in,' Vought replied, then switched to the *Griffon*'s intercom channel. 'Sorda, arm the weapons. Open the bay.' A red indicator glyph on Vought's console glowed, indicating the bombardier's readiness, and across the ventral hull of the bomber, heavy metal doors yawned open revealing a tightly packed payload of ten spin-stabilised, gravity assisted bombs. Each of the warheads contained two hundred kilos of dense high explosive compound and an iridium penetrator fuse, designed to pierce through enemy armour before detonating. From the nose turret, Weslund began to sing a hymn about blood and fire, his reedy voice carrying through the fuselage.

In the weapons bay Sorda gave the bombs a smile, like a proud parent about to send a child out into the world. He had chalked a devotional message on every one of the grey cases; the closest one bore the words 'The Emperor's Might Knows no Boundaries' in his precise gothic hand. He glanced down through the open hatch, watching shot and shell flash by beneath *Griffon*'s wings.

Vought saw a flare of power from the *Basilisk*'s engines and the other Marauder dipped down toward the centre of the heretic army. *Griffon* shivered violently as a flak shell blew close by, spent shrapnel clattering off the wing. The aircraft commander sighted down over the nose, past the lascannon turret. For a moment, Vought thought his eyes had deceived him; there appeared to be a grounded starship down there in the mud, a flat expanse of hull like a beached steel whale. What he saw was the mobile command post of the heretics, a colossal land leviathan easily the size of an Imperial frigate. Great tracks and spiked wheels churned at mud and earth, labouring the vehicle forward, flattening hills and uprooting woodlands before it. And there at the very centre of it, beckoning Vought like a target on a range, was a hideous grinning skull set upon a star.

At the sight of it, Weslund spat a foul curse over the intercom and began to babble in dark, stentorian tones, breaking his litany every few moments with a discharge from his cannons.

Basilisk swooped down over the prow of the leviathan, jinking from side to side to dodge tracer spat from Hydra batteries. 'Ready. Ready,' said Marko. 'Drop—'

The bomber's commander never finished his sentence; a vibrant laser flare tore into *Basilisk* from the eye of the skull and cut down the middle. The aircraft's fuel reservoir tore open and exploded, instantly flashing the bomber to ash.

'Lord's blood!' Weslund gasped.

Vought set his jaw and pushed the yoke forward, mirroring *Basilisk*'s attack run. All about him, he heard the bomber's bolter turrets chatter as Nilner and Stoi raked the enemy with punishing salvos.

He would only have seconds before the leviathan would be able to recharge the massive lascannon for another shot.

'Ready. Ready,' Vought called.

Sorda made a sign of supplication to the Golden Throne and gripped the release switch, pressing his eye to the sightglass.

'Drop.' The instant the captain's command left his lips, Sorda slammed the knife switch down and with a well oiled whirr of machinery, the clamps holding the bombs in place opened in perfect order. Each of the weapons shrieked as it dropped out of the bomb bay and into the fast flowing air, the wind whistling through the fusing propeller and steering vanes. The bombs struck hard across the leviathan's hull in bright flares of flame.

Vought poured power into *Griffon's* engines and pulled back on the yoke, arcing the aircraft up and away from the target site. He allowed himself a sneer at the heretic's expense as the laser cannon cracked through the air where the Marauder had just been. 'Too slow,' he whispered, from behind his breather mask.

As the flyer turned outbound, Vought's concentration returned to threading the bomber through the storm of anti-aircraft fire. Almost as an afterthought, he toggled the intercom. 'Stoi, report,' he demanded from the tailgunner. 'Target status?'

When the weapons officer didn't reply straight away, Vought felt a flicker of irritation. 'Stoi, wake up! What is the status of the target?'

Every crewman on *Griffon* was surprised when the gunner gave a terse, single word response. 'Undamaged.'



KILOMETERS FROM the combat, Aves and Dolenz exchanged glances. 'What does that mean?' said the crewman. 'The bombs misfired?'

Dolenz shook his head. 'Nothing like that. That great bloody tank, I'll warrant it'll take more than standard ordnance and cordite to crack it.'

Aves fell silent as Vought's commands echoed out from the faraway bomber.



THE CAPTAIN turned to call down into the fuselage below the cockpit. 'Kheed, get down there and confirm Stoi's sighting. I want to know if there were secondary explosions, anything.'

Without looking to see if his orders were being followed, Vought flicked to the main comm channel and relayed a warning about the leviathan's lascannon, but the remainder of the 404th were still caught in the flak, fighting to stay on course and bomb the living hell out of the heretics below them.

Kheed reached the hatch to Stoi's turret and cranked it open. The albino gunner said nothing, and handed him a pair of ageing field glasses, stabbing one bony finger at the smoke wreathed horizon below. The navigator searched for the steel deck of the land leviathan and found it. Smoke poured from massive chimneys along its spine, and tracer fire arced skyward from myriad guns along its armoured hide, but no flames or structural damage were evident, beyond a few pits and dents across the face of the grinning skull.

The navigator keyed the intercom and spoke in a flat, toneless voice. 'Target remains, captain. Confirming, status is undamaged.'

Vought's lip curled in annoyance and he pitched the Marauder round in a harsh wingover, determined to see the leviathan for himself. 'A force field, Kheed?' he snapped.

'Negative. Sir, they must have armour as thick as a battlecruiser to shrug off a strike like that.'

'Indeed,' Vought fumed quietly. The intelligence reports from Imperial Guard on the ground had mentioned nothing of this, and now the squadron had lost aircraft in an attack that would have failed even if the enemy crew were blind or

asleep. The captain decided that there would be harsh words spoken with his Guard counterparts on return to Point November.

'Incoming!' Nilner's rough shout cut through Vought's train of thought. 'Lightnings, coming out of the suns!'

The pilot turned the bomber hard to port and flicked a glance upward. He saw a trio of bat-winged fighters vectoring in on their position. 'Gunners, target and annihilate! Sweep the heretic scum out of the sky!'

Nilner pedalled his turret around to follow the lead fighter as it swooped down on *Griffon*. His big, sweaty hands enveloped the firing grips and squeezed. In answer, the heavy bolter cannons screamed death into the flashing shape of the seized Lightning. The massive bolts tore through the engine cowlings of the flyer and shattered the glass cockpit, turning the interior into a red ruin. Nilner grunted his approval and turned the turret around, looking for another kill.

The gunner had been quick to spot the trio of interceptors, and true to the training doctrine that had been drilled into him, Nilner concentrated his attention on the most immediate targets. Consequently, he never saw the fourth Lightning, hanging back from the trio, as it emerged from the brightness of Rocene's twin suns. As *Griffon* turned to avoid the laser trails from its surviving squadmates, the other fighter tore over the nose of the Marauder, triggering a long burst from the autocannon mounted on its chin. The first burst struck the number three engine, which blasted out a cascade of flame and broken turbine blades before choking into silence.

Vought saw nothing but a grey shadow as the heretic pilot passed by his cockpit with only a few metres to spare. Autocannon rounds crashed through the bomber's hull at point blank range, silencing Weslund's songs for the Emperor forever as they ripped him apart. Part of the captain's canopy shredded as shots grazed the air near where he sat, but left him unharmed.

Nilner fired blindly at the oncoming Lightning and tore off one of its wing-mounted engines for good measure; but in return, a hot shell from the autocannon, big enough to punch through a ceramite plate, took all of his left leg below the knee. The big gunner screamed and spat blood.

Vought swore a blistering curse that would have earned him a dozen lashes if it had been spoken in earshot of a commissar, hands rigid around the yoke as cold air howled through holes in his cockpit. He shouted into the communicator, not knowing if his voice would be carried back to the airfield.

'Point November, this is *Griffon*. Mission failed. Returning to base.'



AVES WAS WAITING by the runway when the first of the Marauders emerged from the clouds. Sentinel powerlifters and Trojan crawlers fitted for firefighting details were clustered by the ramp, ready to move at a moment's notice if a bomber made a crash landing. The crewman squinted into the murky sky and his breath caught as he counted the steel grey shapes as they closed in, many of them trailing smoke in black streams. By his count, only a quarter of the squadron had returned.

Aves saw *Griffon* then, the watery sunlight glinting off the shattered nose turret. One of the lascannons had been completely sheared away, and the broken spars of the turret sphere looked like ragged teeth in a howling, angry mouth. As he watched, the landing skids emerged from their hatches and locked into place. With the number three engine a shredded wreck, it seemed that Captain Vought was preparing to forego the more difficult vertical touchdown and attempt a runway landing. The fire crews saw this as well, and the Trojans started up their motors, rotating in place to tear after the bomber if the need arose.

Griffon turned into the wind at the end of the runway and trembled slightly. Aves found he could not take his eyes off the wounded flyer as it descended towards the ferrocrete airstrip. At the last second, Vought chopped the Marauder's throttles and the heavy bomber touched down with an echoing scrape. The landing skids spat sparks and wisps of vaporised paint where they kissed the runway. The aircraft flashed past Aves, choking him with a lungful of smoke from the damaged engine. Two Trojans roared into life and made off after the Marauder; Aves leapt and grabbed a handhold on the second, clinging on as it rumbled toward the slowing bomber.

At the end of the runway, *Griffon* skidded to the right and almost left the paved airstrip, finally shuddering to a halt on the grassy abutment nearby. Guardsmen scrambled over to the flyer, wrenching open the hatchway, and Aves followed. Up close, he could see the myriad holes and scars from bolter impacts and laser burns that dotted the underside of the fuselage. The Marauder stank of spilled fuel, and dark puddles of lubricant were already beginning to pool beneath it where conduits had been severed by shrapnel. *Griffon* seemed to sag beneath her own weight, bleeding fluid into the mud.

Aves heard a strangled scream and turned to see Kheed and one of the Guardsmen moving Nilner out of the hatch. The gunnery officer's uniform was slick with blood, the stark white of bone dangling from where his leg used to be; the leg he'd used to kick Aves savagely, gone now, torn to fleshy tatters. Kheed caught his eye and shouted.

'Aves, get over here! He's bleeding out and I can't stop it.' He nodded toward a small three-wheeled rover parked at the end of the runway. 'Get him to the infirmary, fast!'

The Guardsman laid Nilner down on the flatbed and strapped him in. Kheed waved a blood smeared hand at Aves. 'He's lost a lot of blood. If you don't hurry, he'll be dead, understand? So get going!'

'Yessir!' Aves replied nervously, but Kheed was already gone, rushing back to the bomber. The Trojan crews were squirting fire retardants over the wing, leaving him alone with his charge. Aves climbed into the saddle and gunned the engine, yanking the handlebars around in a tight turn. He heard Nilner wail as the rover bounced over a bump in the road.

Aves pushed down the accelerator and cut across the tracks between the runways. The direct route to the infirmary would take a few minutes, following the service road around the barracks and hangars. It would be quicker to thread through the alleys formed by the maintenance sheds. Aves made a tight turn and drove out of sight, into the shadows by the base wall.

Nilner was babbling something incoherent from the litter behind him, alternatively weeping and coughing as the trike skipped over the ferrocrete paving. Aves brought the rover skidding to a halt at a junction and hesitated.

'Aves!' the delirious gunner shouted. 'You took my leg, you little bastard!' The crewman watched Nilner thrash against the restraints. His eyes were unfocused as he raved. Aves realised that Nilner was completely unaware of his surroundings, maddened with shock and pain. 'Worthless piece of excrement! You're pathetic!'

He took his foot off the accelerator and watched Nilner silently. There was nobody around this part of the base, nobody to hear the gunner's shouts. Aves watched the crimson patch of blood soaked cloth on Nilner's litter as it grew and grew, fed by the big man's vital fluid. A cold, callous thought began to form in his mind.

'If you don't hurry, he'll be dead.' Aves spoke Kheed's words out loud. It would be so simple to just wait, he mused. So easy to stay here and watch Nilner bleed out his last in agonised delirium. He studied the gunner's tunic, the bloodstained wings on his uniform breast.

'I hate you,' Aves told him in a quiet voice. 'You make my life a misery for your own sport and now I have yours in my

hands.' He leaned closer to Nilner's sweaty face and recognition glimmered in the gunner's eyes.

'Aves,' he rasped. 'Help me!'

The crewman's face twisted in anger; suddenly he wanted to make Nilner beg for his life, he wanted him to suffer. 'It's my choice now!' Aves growled. 'My choice if you live and die!'

Nilner seemed very small then, a wretched and feeble shadow of the thug that had tormented Aves for months. 'Please...' he whispered.



SORDA TAPPED AVES on the shoulder and the crewman gave a start. 'Sir! Forgive me, I was just loading parts for the repairs on *Griffon*—'

'I know. The captain tells me that we have a replacement engine and spares for the lascannon.' He paused. 'This is not about *Griffon*.'

'Sir?'

'This is about Nilner.'

Aves looked away. 'I followed my orders, bombardier.'

'Yes. Yes, you did.' Sorda gestured towards the infirmary. 'He'll live. The tech-priests will be able to give him a mechanical leg, just like Dolenz. The apothecaries told me you got him there just in time. A few minutes more, and they would not have been able to save him.'

'I followed my orders,' Aves repeated.

'And I can't imagine why you did.' Sorda stepped closer, lowering his voice. 'Do you think that he will thank you for it or be grateful? That's not his way, Aves. Nilner has no compassion in him, not a spark of it. If your places had been reversed, he would not have hesitated to let you perish.'

Aves spoke after a long pause. 'I know, sir. But I'm not him. As much as I wish I could be sometimes, I'm not like Nilner.'

The officer gave him a measuring gaze and then nodded toward the load of equipment the crewman had been assembling. 'Captain Vought has been summoned to the command post for new orders. *Griffon* will be airworthy before nightfall, yes?'

'With the Emperor's blessing, yes.'

'Get to it then, and we'll fly against these heretics again.'



AVES CLIMBED OUT of the bomb bay, rubbing a cloth over his hands to wipe off the grease and muck. The fuel feeds for the replacement engine were now secured, and his job was done. *Griffon* would fly, if the Imperium so commanded it. The crewman noticed a train of ordnance carriers snaking across the service road. Dragged by a Trojan crawler were a dozen flatbeds, each dominated by the bulk of an Atlas bomb. Aves had never seen an Atlas up close before. They were like long, distended teardrops ending in a splay of winglets, heavy and threatening. Unlike the standard bombs the Marauders usually carried, Atlas warheads were so huge that only one could be taken aboard each aircraft. Aves knew little about ordnance but everyone in the Navy knew what an Atlas looked like. Concealed inside that oblate black cowl was an atomic charge big enough to crack a mountain.

Nearby, Sorda was speaking with the remainder of the bomber's crew. 'With Weslund dead, we'll need someone to man the lascannon. Kheed, you can take that post. We won't need a navigator to find that cursed leviathan again.'

Kheed's face soured. 'A gunnery post? I don't think the captain would agree—'

'Captain Vought authorised me to issue whatever orders I saw fit,' Sorda interrupted. 'You may feel that cannon duty is beneath you, Mister Kheed, but necessity overrides your personal feelings. Man the weapon, that's an order.'

'You won't get your hands too dirty,' said Stoi sarcastically. It was possibly the longest sentence that Sorda had ever heard the tailgunner speak.

'What about you, then?' Kheed sneered. 'You'll be leaving your precious bombs to stand at Nilner's turret?'

Sorda shook his head, watching the Trojan approach. 'We'll only be carrying a single munition. I have to be the one to get it on target.' But the Trojan rolled right past *Griffon* without stopping, taking the bombs to the other flyers on the ready line.

Aves's face creased in confusion. Was the Marauder to be given a conventional load while all the others in the squadron would carry an Atlas? His answer came as Captain Vought strode out of the lengthening shadows of evening toward the assembled crew.

'Captain,' Sorda began, 'those Atlas—'

'We are to stand down,' Vought said bluntly. A ripple of disbelief passed through *Griffon's* crew. 'Because of the shortage of personnel, we're to remain on base and assist with the evacuation.'

'Transport duty?' Kheed said, his voice rising. 'We're fit to be nothing more than a common shuttle now?'

Vought ignored the interruption. 'Command has ordered that Point November be abandoned and all Imperial Guard forces are to fall back. A full company of the Doom Eagles are on their way from Merron, and the remaining combat capable aircraft in the 404th will launch a final bombardment prior to their arrival.'

'*Griffon* is ready!' Aves blurted out. Normally, he wouldn't have dreamed of speaking out of turn, but his heart was racing and his better judgement was forgotten.

'The grease monkey's right,' snapped Kheed. 'We can fly right now, captain. Command can't brush us aside like this!'

Vought's voice was icy. 'Command can do whatever they wish, navigator. We go where the Emperor wills, and you would do well not to let your desire for glory tell you otherwise.'

'But why, captain?' Sorda pressed. 'Did we work around the clock to reach flight status just so we could ferry boxes of paperwork up to orbit?'

'I was informed by the wing commander that *Griffon* will not be granted battle ready status without a replacement for Nilner.' Vought was tense. He shared his crewmen's anger at being denied a chance to avenge themselves on the heretics. 'No one can be spared to take his place. The commander felt that in such an undermanned state, *Griffon* would be wasted on the sortie.'

'I can take Nilner's turret, sir,' said Aves. 'I can stand his post.'

Kheed made a face as if he had smelt something bad. 'You can't be serious. You're a washout, a grounded weakling!'

Vought gave the crewman a hard stare. 'Look me in the eyes, Aves. Convince me.'

Aves did as he was ordered, a powerful wellspring of surety surging up inside him. 'It will be my honour to serve the Emperor.'

The captain felt a flicker of surprise as he saw something in Aves that he'd never seen before – a steely, unbending resolve. He gave him a brusque nod and turned to Sorda. 'Get him outfitted and have the ordnance crew load an Atlas aboard. We'll lift in fifteen.'

Aves never saw the looks of incredulity on the faces of the other men. He was elated, and it was all he could do not to whoop for joy and cry out thanks to the heavens; but then Vought was at his side and the captain was speaking in low, grave tones.

'Mark me well, lad. If you blunder up there, you'll be the death of us all, and by the Golden Throne I swear you'll die screaming before I do!'

The crewman gave a shaky nod.

'You should have been careful about what you wished for. Now you're going to learn the truth about your dreams – those fantasies you have about wearing the wings, that's all they were. The reality is enough to ruin some men for life.' He paused, turning to study the darkening sky. 'You're in it now, lad. No turning back.'

'I... I'll do my best, captain.'

'Yes. Or we'll all die.'



GRIFFON DOVE INTO the battle on spears of orange flame, knifing through the sky amid the ragged remains of the 404th. Aves felt his gut knotting in fear. The sky, the perfect night sky of Rocene that he'd admired so many times from the safety of the ground was gone now, replaced by an ominous void choked with explosions and spitting streaks of inferno. He gripped the dorsal bolter cannons tightly as the Marauder sank into a voyage through the footless hall of an airborne hell.

Off to port, he saw the eye-searing flash of a laser as it connected the ground briefly with another flyer that seemed to vanish in a cloud of ashes, disappearing like some twisted conjuring trick. Aves blinked furiously, his eyes watering as the bright beam remained imprinted as a purple stripe on his retinas. The thick air was a mix of turbulence and random thermals, hot gas and smoke rising upward from the ground where great swathes of city lay burning or Imperial forces died by the thousands in heretic fuelled death pyres.

The crewman twitched as he glanced around inside the enclosed steel turret, frantically trying to scan every inch of the horizon at once, terrified that some enemy would approach from just the direction he hadn't been looking. The triggers of the bolters were wet with sweat from his palms, and he found himself remembering the uncountable times he had wiped them down after a mission. Aves imagined Nilner, sitting where he was now, feeling the same fears, courting the same terrors.

The screeching chatter of Stoi's tail guns brought him crashing out of his reverie and Aves spun the dorsal turret around to sight down the fuselage. The albino gunner was pouring rounds into the sky behind *Griffon*, but Aves could not see a

target; then they appeared, bursting out of the funeral black mist like two angels of death, twin Thunderbolt fighters each smeared with foul graffiti and Chaotic symbols. Stoi caught the leader with a well aimed salvo that shattered the heretic flyer. The wingman reacted quicker and executed a sharp wingover, dancing close to Aves's sights. The crewman shouted out a wordless cry and slammed the triggers home.

Bolt shells tore the flyer into ribbons and it collapsed in on itself, folding up into a burning knot of metal. Aves found himself grinning and panting as he realised he had just made his second kill.

White light flared out in the distance, casting stark, sharp edged shadows in the turret. The crackle of static over his headset confirmed that one of the bombers had dropped its Atlas, immolating untold numbers of heretic troops in an instant atomic holocaust.

Something glittered in the clouds to starboard and he turned the guns to train on it. Through his auspex, Aves saw another of *Griffon's* sister bombers, a Marauder Destroyer variant, spitting orange fire from ducts along the fuselage, and without warning one of the vessel's wings broke away. Fragments of metal sliced through the air around the bomber and peppered *Griffon's* wings, slicing through fuel lines and fluid channels. Aves's heart leapt into his mouth as jets of combustion streamed from the engine cowlings. A large spear of broken metal clattered over his head and ricocheted off the tailplane, spiking through Stoi's turret as it passed. The tailgunner's bolters drooped and fell silent.

Griffon flew on, cutting through the sky, seemingly unaware that her lifeblood fuel was bleeding out behind her, that one of her crewmen had likely just been killed. All around him, Aves saw an inverted rain of bright fireflies lancing up into the darkness, streaking past in thin glowing trails. The bomber jinked wildly to port, slamming his head against the console, knocking sense into him.

'Tracers!' Aves trembled as cannon rounds from a massed battery of Hydras converged on the bomber. In places where the hull had been patched with thin, sub-standard plating, the flak cut through *Griffon's* fuselage and ate into her vital systems.

'*Griffon*, inbound to target. Terra, protect us.' Vought's voice, tight and forced, spoke from Aves's comm-set, and he heard the grinding metallic noise of the bomb bay doors opening.

Still the tracers chewed and nipped at the Marauder as she turned into the wind. Aves glanced over his shoulder toward the nose and saw smoke streaming from the lascannon turret, the cupola ravaged by a direct hit from below. First Weslund, now Kheed; the devotional icons and prayer pamphlets Weslund had decorated the inside of the turret with had not stopped the cramped metal sphere from becoming the coffin for two men.

The clouds were thinning even as the raging storm of gunfire increased. The bomber dropped into the attack slope toward the heretic's mobile base, and Aves could see where a near miss from an Atlas had run it aground. A second hit would kill the big machine once and for all, cutting out the heart of the apostate forces. Aves felt his fear wane as a cold, clinical calm came over him. The certainty, the rightness of purpose he had felt on the runway was in him once again, and he heard Captain Vought's words echo in his mind: 'He must understand that the Emperor places his servants where they are needed.'

Aves nodded to himself. This was where he had been destined to be. *Griffon* was shuddering all around him, electrical arcs jumping from component to component, the burnt tang of sizzling plastics mingling with the stink of hot metal; and then he heard the voice. A single word.

'Aves...' The captain poured a lifetime of agony into his name.

In an instant, the crewman had vaulted out of his seat and dropped into the fuselage; he dashed past the hatch to the bomb bay, barely registering Sorda's body sprawled across the floor there, blackened

shreds where his chest had been. Aves pulled himself up the ladder rungs and into the cramped cockpit. The handholds were slippery with liquid, and the crewman felt his gorge rise as he realised it was Vought's blood.

'Captain...'

Vought held one hand pressed to his throat, fingers wet around a knife of glass embedded in his larynx. His face was bathed in red light cast from a dozen warning glyphs on the console before him. 'Boy. Listen.' He spoke in ragged gasps. 'Can't launch... Atlas... Too much damage.' *Griffon* bucked as a shell chewed a lump out of her wing. Vought nodded at him. 'Take over.'

Aves did not question the order, quickly unstrapping the pilot from his couch. Released, Vought slipped to the floor of the cockpit, barely breathing. Aves took the captain's place, feeling pools of vital fluid soaking into his flightsuit.

Beyond the cockpit window, the land leviathan was growing to fill the horizon, the plume of smoke emerging from its cracked hull like an arrow in its side.


Aves reached forward and flipped the arming switch for the Atlas from safe to active setting. 'Ready, sir.'

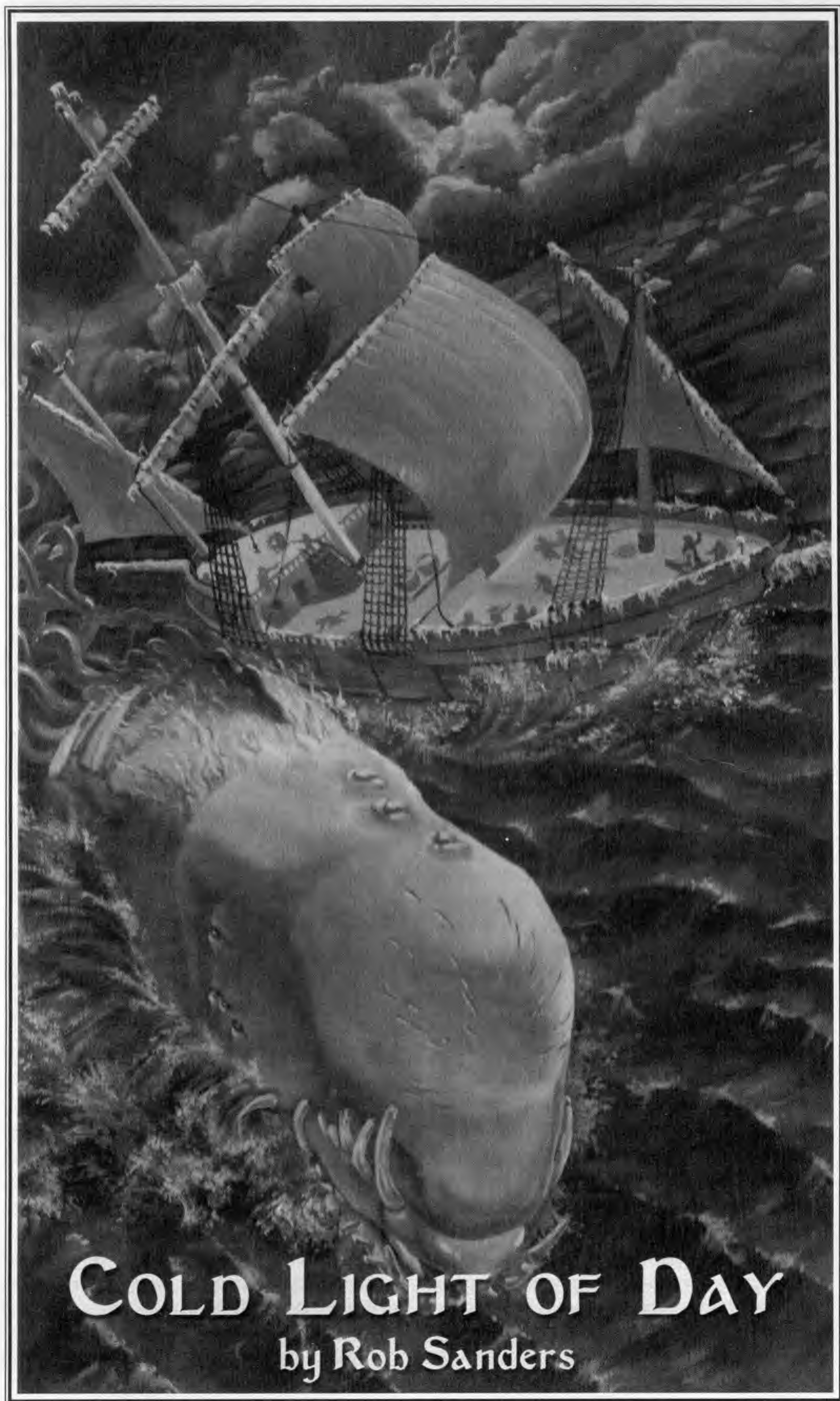
'Good lad.' With painful effort, Vought forced himself up and held out his hands. 'Take this. Quickly, now.'

The captain placed a blood-stained emblem in Aves's trembling hand, an age-yellowed skull framed with skeletal wings. The crewman ran his finger over them, caressing the careworn bone carving.

'Earn them, lad. You know what must be done,' Vought coughed. 'Wear them with honour.'

The crewman turned *Griffon* into the face of the gunfire, pinning the bone wings to his chest; then he reached for the throttle and pushed the Marauder's engines to the redline.

Griffon fell into the leviathan like a spear thrown by the Machine God himself, and in the glorious firestorm of her sacrifice, the heretics knew the wrath of the Imperium's most steadfast souls. 



COLD LIGHT OF DAY

by Rob Sanders

CAPTAIN BALE Charnoslav of the *Blagovashchenko* uncorked the bottle and drank, letting let the liquid fire slide down his throat. The crowded quarterdeck of the whaler was bustling with sailors and petty officers who drove them on with batons and fierce looks. All knew better than to disturb their captain when he had a bottle in his hand. He was no drunkard or tyrant but he had his ways, and this was one of them.

New hands were no doubt baffled by their commander's behaviour, some stopping to watch as Charnoslav detached the bottle from his lips with a slurp and made a toast to the chill waters of the river Lynsk. If they hadn't been rapped across the back of the skull with a belaying pin, they would have seen him pour the rest of the bottle into the water and then they would have known he was mad. Charnoslav didn't feel the need to explain his actions to his crew. He was captain and commander and his orders would be obeyed.

As it was, he was not drinking to the waters for safe passage or to appease some ocean deity. He was saluting the battered shell of the one hundred gun *Kraskovia*, dismasted and broken backed on the mudflats in the centre of the river. He had served on her as a master's mate, during her last voyage. The old lady had received a mauling in her final action and, in the boarding that followed, lost all officers and over two thirds of her men. Charnoslav brought her back into Erengard, shattered and jury-rigged but afloat and victorious. She had been paid off and turned into a prison hulk, a notoriously effective one. No one had ever escaped from the *Kraskovia* alive. The mud flats spelt certain death for anyone trying to cross them. Their reputation was enough to deter most would-be escapees.

There were several hulks lining the mouth of the river: the *Tsar Alexandr*, the disease ridden *Osminog*, Admiral Rebrov's *Borodino* and the colossal *Imperatritsa*. Charnoslav always took his convicts from *Kraskovia*, however. He felt the old lady brought him luck, which he needed. He was well known in Erengard as the 'crazy captain' who hunted whales at the top of the world. Sometimes, ghoulish crowds would gather on the wharfs to gape at the

warped monstrosities he brought in. The trading company paid handsomely, they could afford to with the gargantuan specimens that Charnoslav towed into harbour, but outlawed waters and killer catches were enough to dissuade most of the city's sailors and whalers from joining his crew. Charnoslav was forced to recruit wreckers, freebooters, smugglers and madmen from the city's prison hulks, their freedom bought by the company.

The captain glared maniacally around his vessel, flashing the whites of his eyes and his teeth at the motley specimens that tramped by.

'I signed aboard a whaler,' Charnoslav sang harshly up the deck. 'I made me mark it's true. An' I'll serve out me contract, as I swore that I would do. But those devil fish they rammed us; they smashed us one by one. They stove the boats in with head and fluke, and after they was done, we poor souls left half-alive, was clinging to debris...'

'Excuse me, captain.'

Charnoslav turned slowly with a lazy snarl to finish his shanty:

'I'll never let those bastards rest, I'll never let them be. Not until you find me, at the bottom of the sea.'

The captain greeted the newcomer with dead eyes, his displeasure obvious even through his thick beard. In the middle of the deck stood a thin, bespectacled man who looked completely out of place on the deck of a whaling vessel. He was clean and wore expensive clothes with trims and frills. In his arms he held a collection of scrolls and papers. The captain could read, but that had only taught him to distrust words more. Charnoslav took an instant dislike to the spruce stranger.

'My name is Nickolai Mendelstamm of the Paluga-Bel'kovo Trading Company. I represent the interests of Miss Andreyka Bel'kovo...' The clerk hesitated for a moment, detecting no signs of recognition on the captain's weather beaten face. *'You do know of Miss Bel'kovo, don't you, captain?'* Mendelstamm persisted.

'Can't say as I do. Now, Mister Whatever-your-name is, I'm busy. My ship leaves tonight. Why don't you come back tomorrow?' Charnoslav barged past him, scattering a group of resting sailors with a

curl of his lip. He detested these city types with their short hair and heavy purses. He grabbed a signals telescope and trained it on the latest boatload of convicts he had recruited from the prison hulk. They were making slow progress across the bay.

'I'm afraid that won't be possible, captain,' the clerk called after him. Charnoslav pulled the telescope away and regarded him sourly.

'You still here?' he asked with genuine surprise. He handed the telescope to a passing sailor. 'Pass word for the boatswain. Straight away if you please.' Mendelstamm swallowed and watched the smirking sailor go. Steeling himself he looked back at Charnoslav, but the captain was already by the wheel, checking his maps and charts. Straightening his cloak, Mendelstamm approached him once again.

'Captain, I regret to inform you of the death of your employer, Anton Bel'kovo. I'm sorry.'

Charnoslav grunted. 'Don't be. I hardly knew him. I only deal with Boris.' The captain cupped his hands and shouted overboard: 'Boat ahoy!' Mendelstamm visibly jumped. 'Give way, you damned lubbers!'

'Miss Bel'kovo has assumed control of her father's share of the company. We are unhappy with the books and their order, and we have some reservations in particular about your methods.'

'I drag porkers into harbour, see,' Charnoslav glowered at the clerk. 'What you and your bastard company does with them afterwards is your business. I just find 'em and kill 'em.'

'In illegal waters,' Mendelstamm reminded him. Charnoslav turned on the quill-pusher, grabbing his arms and pinning them against his chest. Mendelstamm wheezed. The captain glared at him.

'Wherever I can find 'em.' The two men shared a moment, oblivious to the whaler's frozen observers. Mendelstamm went to say something, but thought better of it. The grin of a maniac spread across Charnoslav's face and the captain burst into song once more: *'Now Oleg's blind, Yerik's lost an arm, and Sevastian's gone below. My leg will heal but other men, no more aloft*

can go. I'll never let those bastards rest, I'll never let them be. Not until you find me, at the bottom of the sea.'

Charnoslav finally released his grip and pushed the clerk back across the deck. The insane gaiety had gone from the captain as fast as it had appeared. He stood tall and serious. 'I hunt monsters. That costs money and it costs lives.' Charnoslav rubbed his fingers at the fallen clerk, still feeling the silkiness of his robe on his rough skin. 'You sir, haven't done badly out of it.' Charnoslav looked around, noticing the still bodies on the deck and in the rigging. 'Get back to work, you swabs!' he growled, 'lively there, unless you want to find out what a whale looks like from the inside. Ahh, Mr Denko.' Mendelstamm turned around to find the hulking shape of the gap toothed boatswain behind him. 'Mr Mendelstamm is leaving us.'

'Aye, sir,' the boatswain rasped, half dragging the molested clerk to his feet.

'Belay that order!'

From behind Mr Denko's huge form stepped a young lady dressed in modest skins and furs. She was not pretty but her hair was red and striking. The boatswain looked from the woman to his captain, confused. Charnoslav looked from Denko to the woman, who was advancing like a predatory cat. And then he noticed the fine trunks and cases being loaded on the quarterdeck behind her.

'Over my dead body,' Charnoslav hissed.

'Get up, Mr Mendelstamm, there's a good gentleman,' she said as she stepped around her clerk, but she didn't take her eyes off Charnoslav. She offered her hand and a disarming smile, given the ugly nature of the scene. 'Pleased to meet you captain, I'm—'

'Miss Bel'kovo, yes.' Charnoslav became aware, once again, that his vessel had come to a complete standstill. There was a woman on the quarterdeck. Little work would be done while she remained. 'I needs to speak with you,' he growled, already manhandling her towards the gangway. She shrugged him off with a cold look.

'I'm not a slab of whale meat, captain.'

Charnoslav dropped his eyes and lowered his voice, his eyes flicking between the soft but determined lines on

her face and the dirty smirks of some of his crew. They would not make the same distinction she had.

'Listen to me, Miss Bel'kovo. I've just learned of the death of your father. I'm sorry an' all.'

'Don't be,' she replied abruptly. 'I hardly knew him.'

Charnoslav pursed his lips. 'But, you see, taking passage on this here vessel would be a rash thing to do. Beyond the danger of the hunt itself, my men are largely convicts.'

'I know. My company pays for them.' Again she smiled.

'You're not hearing me, lass. They're thieves, murderers and madmen. They're not to be trusted. I can't have a woman on board. Impossible.'

'Captain, this is my charter.'

'Your charter,' Charnoslav spat, 'but my ship!'

'And my crew,' Bel'kovo reminded him. 'It seems we have reached an impasse.' Charnoslav boiled in front of her, not quite understanding the words that she was using and finding it difficult to find his own. He had not felt this way since he was a boy, wrangling with his sister Yelena over the kitchen table.

'Now you do whatever you have to do to make this situation tolerable, captain, but my clerk and I sail on this vessel tonight.' She spun on her heel and strode across the deck, making for the hatchway. 'Mr Mendalstamm, with me please. Boatswain, bring our things,' she called before disappearing below decks.

Despite his earlier pomposity, Mendalstamm didn't look like he relished the idea of spending the next few months on board. He gathered his papers and, averting his gaze, hurried past Charnoslav.

Denko approached the captain with a sloping grin and said, 'Do you want me to throw 'em overboard sir, like that lady we found in the fo'c'sle that time?'

Charnoslav took a moment to think. It didn't come naturally to him – he was a man of action.

'No. Move me things into the chart room,' Charnoslav handed the boatswain a brass key, 'and move our guests into my cabin.'

'Aye sir.' The huge sailor nodded and loped off in the direction of the trunks and cases.

'And Mr Denko.'

'Yes, captain?'

'Lock them in.'



THE *BLAGOVASHCHENKO* sailed north. The waters grew cold and the weather unnatural. Strange storms hovered on the horizon and large ungainly creatures flew high overhead. Charnoslav pushed onwards, ignoring the groans of his crew and the concerns of Uri, his first mate. The whaler was on her own, with only the increasingly frequent sight of icebergs for company. The ship was caked in frost, apart from the tryworks, where copper cauldrons steamed and bubbled, waiting for their first taste of whale flesh. Men gathered around the fires in solemn groups, bemoaning their fate, too cold to sleep in the fo'c'sle. Lanterns punctured the darkness at intervals along the ship and the drone of the lookouts carried on the crisp breeze, guiding the helmsmen and keeping the ship out of the path of icebergs.

Charnoslav spent most of his time on deck, eager for a sighting or a call from the tops. He had spent even more time here since he had inherited the cramped cot in the chart room. He was not a good sleeper and had got even less of late. It was for the best, anyhow. The crew were restless and argumentative. Uri had returned with a choice group from the *Kraskovia*. The old lady had not brought him luck this time. They were all experienced seamen, but they were wreckers and mutineers for the most part. There had been fights, murders and even a fire started by a religious maniac refusing to travel any further north.

News that there was a woman on board had spread even faster than the fire, and had given men far from the comforts of Erengard something to think about. The floggings were the worst. Every other day Charnoslav had Denko break another

sailor on the rack for some villainous misdemeanour. Punishment had to be carried out, but the constant sight of flayed and bloody flesh filled the ship with a feeling of resentment and mutiny. Whaling required teamwork and Charnoslav blamed this atmosphere for their lack of success so far. The lack of success only drove them northwards, however, filling the crew with further desperation and discontent.

'Mr Arzenhammer,' Charnoslav called one night, as he often did, across the midnight deck, 'a little something to warm the bones?' Hargund Arzenhammer was the *Blagovashchenko's* dwarf sailing master. The dwarf hailed from the sea port of Barak Varr, far to the south. He was a carpenter, engineer and a master navigator and never lost the look of nervous concentration that wrinkled his bushy brow. He had an uncanny feel for wind and water and Charnoslav had never known him get it wrong. If the master said there would be fog, then within the hour the vessel would be becalmed and smothered in a curtain of white. Charnoslav passed him the flask and went back to whittling down a whale tooth with a scrimshaw blade.

'Thank you, sir,' the dwarf answered gruffly. He parted his thick boat cloak and took a polite sip, then passed it back. It was their little ritual. Charnoslav knew that the whole bottle would have little effect on the dwarf's robust constitution.

'The wind's backed a point or two.'

'Aye, sir. An' it will further. Some rain as well, I bet. Before dawn. I'll shave me beard if she doesn't, although I don't know what will fall from those ill-begotten clouds,' Hargund nodded. His face threatened to completely disappear in the folds of a frown that almost brought his beard to his eyebrows. 'Can I speak candidly, sir.'

'We're all friends here,' Charnoslav laughed, slapping a meaty hand on the back of his helmsman, Egor, a hunch-backed mass murderer from Praag. Hargund lowered his voice to a barely audible boom.

'We've been off the charts for two weeks. Every voyage, we push that little bit further.'

'He's here,' Charnoslav replied stiffly, grabbing the frosted rail. 'He's got a taste for it now. An' these waters won't bother him. He don't feel nothing.' Charnoslav nodded to himself. 'But I can feel him.'

'All I feel is the cold.' The dwarf sneezed into a large red handkerchief. 'Bale.' Charnoslav looked up: it was unusual for them to use first names, on board ship formalities never quite left them. 'We must be getting close to the pack ice, perhaps even the mainland. The Wastes, where no man has business.'

'Are you trying to scare me? You sound like the crew,' Charnoslav chuckled. 'Get to the bones o' the matter, man.'

'We've never been this far north before. You can't ask the men, even this sorry bunch of scum and villainy, to sail to their deaths.'

'We'll go as far as it takes,' Charnoslav assured him through gritted teeth. The sailing master nodded, the moons glinting off his bald head. There was no use arguing with Charnoslav. The man was driven, by loss, by anger and by the flecks of insanity Hargund could see in his raw eyes.

'Aye aye, captain.'

The sailing master set off along the companionway to complete his rounds, leaving Charnoslav to his scrimshaw. The captain plucked and scraped at the whalebone, his hands shaking, but not with the cold – the bottle had seen to that.

'I've been watching you.'

Charnoslav spun around. A hooded figure, swathed in furs and skins stood behind him. It was Bel'kovo's voice.

'What are you doing here?' he asked savagely, pulling her to the rail.

'I come up here every night to get some air and watch the men at work.' She took the flask from his fur-lined pocket and wiped the rim with her sleeve. Charnoslav's face creased into an angry frown. 'I climbed out of the cabin window and up the stern. This is not the first time I've been on board a ship, you know.' She took a swig from the bottle, but found it difficult to hide the grimace that spread across her face. 'Good stuff. What's that?' she said, indicating the object in his huge hand.

Charnoslav hid the scrimshaw in his hand and replaced the blade in his belt. 'It's nothing, just something that I do to pass the time.'

'Let me see,' she insisted, stepping forward. She prized his rough hand open and squinted at the model in the poor light. She traced the outline of the graceful looking vessel with her fingers. 'It's beautiful. You served in the Tsar's navy, didn't you? Is it a vessel you served on?'

'No.' Charnoslav shook his head. He'd been allowed to be distracted. He snatched the scrimshaw back and buried it in the depths of his pocket. 'It's dangerous for you up here.'

'Hence the cunning disguise. Do you think I pass for a sailor?' Andreyka asked playfully.

'This is not a game, Miss Bel'kovo. These men could kill you – or a great deal worse,' he assured her moodily, but it came out more like a threat.

'Don't lecture me, captain.' It was her turn to be savage. 'I come up here and watch a selfish and obsessed man, push his ship, crew and luck further than they have any right to go. To you this is a game, a game you are obsessed with winning. At any cost. Everyone on this ship is expendable to you. And as for "worse", we are at the top of the world, Captain Charnoslav, it doesn't get much worse than this!'

'Thar she blows!' a lookout called. Charnoslav held up a finger as if to silence her. He heard Hargund call from the foremast.

'Nor'-nor' west, fine on the starboard bow.'

Charnoslav snatched a telescope from the helmsman and leapt up into the nettings. Winding his arm through the rat lines he fixed the glass on the shiny black horizon. Then he saw it: a bright, thin plume of flame, reaching up into the heavens. He dropped to the deck, deep in thought. Then a brutal grin spread from its hiding place in his thick beard. He absent-mindedly gave Bel'kovo the glass and moved slowly back to the wheel.

'Alright lads, this is it. That's the one,' Charnoslav bawled along the length of the vessel. 'This hellspawn won't escape us

this time. Mr. Arzenhammer, all 'ands aloft. Loose tops'ls. Helmsmen, steer nor'-nor' west. Put your back into it.'

Bel'kovo pulled the telescope from her eye, confused. 'I don't understand.'

'Miss Bel'kovo, as I have been trying to tell you, this is no ordinary whale. This is no gentle giant o'the deep. These beasts come back to these unnatural waters year by year, an' every year they come back, they grow in size and become ever more freakish.'

His voice was surprisingly calm and gentle. Bel'kovo saw the glow in his eyes. The thrill of the hunt. Men swarmed across the decks, shouted on by hard faced petty officers. Bel'kovo was suddenly surrounded by sailors. They cannoned past, launching themselves into the rigging and shrouds. One slipped on her cloak and tumbled onto the icy planks. Charnoslav plucked him from the deck with a snarl, setting him on his feet like a fallen tin soldier. 'You'd better go below with your clerk.'

'I don't think so,' Bel'kovo informed him. 'This is what I've come to see.'

Charnoslav's eyes screwed up in annoyance. He could do without this distraction. 'Stay close. Don't wander off, no matter what you see.'

The *Blagovashchenko* leaned into the wind, her keel cutting through the icy slush on the surface of the water. Charnoslav was everywhere, roaring into the tops where sailors fought with frost encrusted knots and lines. Bel'kovo stuck close, still in her disguise, watching with professional interest as the captain put sailors, freshly tumbled out of their hammocks, to work on the chains. Mr Denko appeared nearby with his starter – a thick length of knotted rope that he always carried in his belt – and gave them some encouragement. The men lowered the *Blagovashchenko's* four whale boats over the side, their crews armed with an assortment of stabbing weapons: lances, harpoons and flensing blades.

Every so often the captain would grab the glass from the fascinated Bel'kovo and turn it to the north. The spouts of flame were growing larger and nearer.

Charnoslav called behind him, 'Helm, two points north. Aren't you watchin' it?'

There was a pause.

'It's gone.'

'What d'ya mean it's gone,' Charnoslav growled taking the glass and fixing it on the horizon. Bel'kovo was right. It had gone.

'It's probably on a dive,' Bel'kovo reassured him. Charnoslav smashed the telescope over the rail with a sudden fury that shocked her. She took a step back.

'Really?' shot Charnoslav through gritted teeth. 'A whale can go down for hours. One of these things, well y'see they're different. They're altered. It could stay down there for days.' Charnoslav grabbed the rail with white knuckles and lowered his head. Bel'kovo remained quiet, staring out into the inky blackness that surrounded the ship. The brooding captain suddenly let out an unearthly cry, like an animal caught in a trap. He clambered up onto the rail and clawed at his shirt. 'I'm here, you bastard. Come get me!'

Bel'kovo looked around the deck, but no one else was looking. They were obviously used to Charnoslav's bouts of mad fury. The captain dropped his head and climbed down, the fight gone out of him. The whale boats had reached their position. Bel'kovo saw a petty officer waving from one boat and calling for further orders.

Charnoslav lifted his head. 'Hold yer position, damn your eyes!' From above, one of the lookouts made a call, but Charnoslav and Bel'kovo couldn't quite make it out. Looking up they saw him pointing back down. Leaning out over the rail they both saw something incredible. The water was lighting up beneath the ship. Giant bubbles erupted around the hull, accompanied by a stunning glow, getting brighter and brighter with every moment.

'What does that mean?' Bel'kovo asked. Charnoslav didn't answer at first, his mind racing.

'It's under the boat. Now this porker, he's either very smart or very dumb. It's under the damn boat.' Charnoslav seemed worried, which in turn terrified Bel'kovo. He was a formidable hunter but seemed uncertain in circumstances where the roles were reversed.

Charnoslav began barking orders around the vessel, 'Mr Denko, the tryworks and galley fires out if you please. Helm, 'old yer course, steady as she goes. Mr Arzenhammer, load the ballista.' Bel'kovo had seen the weapon, mounted on top of the fo'c'sle. It was a huge crossbow, of dwarven design if the runes were anything to go by, attached to a braced winch. It was impressive, even if it made the vessel appear ugly and unbalanced.

Charnoslav ran back to the rail. The light was almost blinding. Shielding his eyes, Charnoslav peered over and yelled, 'Grab 'old of something!'

A great force hit the hull. The whole vessel rocked and leant over to one side. Men were thrown across the icy decks and one of the copper tryworks pots tumbled, depositing its boiling contents over a group of sailors. Several foretopmen were thrown from the crosstrees. Bel'kovo underestimated the impact and her fists slid off the rail. Charnoslav grabbed her arm and pulled her to the deck. Water showered over them. Bel'kovo looked up through the freezing cascade and saw it.

The monster surged up out of the water beside the ship. It had been a whale once, but years at the bottom of the ocean, near the top of the world had changed it beyond belief. It was huge. Its soft, blubbery skin writhed with perpetual flames. It didn't have one mouth; it had three, each brimming with warped tusks and fangs. As it fell backwards Bel'kovo could see that it had long lost its beautiful paddle-like tail. Its grotesque body trailed into a collection of powerful tentacles, like a squid, driving the massive body of the beast onwards.

When she could pull her eyes from the altered creature, Bel'kovo found that she was alone by the wheel. Charnoslav was on his feet and running the length of the ship. He was heading for the ballista. He found Hargund by the weapon, attempting to shoulder the weight of the fat crossbow around. Throwing himself at it, Charnoslav pushed with all his strength. The ice encrusted weapon let out a screech before turning slowly on its swivel mounting. Lining the harpoon up with the huge body of the creature Charnoslav yelled, 'On the uproll... fire!'

Hargund tugged on the firing mechanism and the harpoon launched with a jolt, throwing the dwarf to the ground. Charnoslav watched the winch spin, giving up its lengths to the harpoon's path. The winch stopped as the weapon buried itself deep into blubber and an unearthly scream filled the air. Charnoslav threw his fist at the sky and roared at the colossal beast.

'It hurts, yes!' the captain wailed.

Bel'kovo felt every timber in the vessel vibrate and had to cover her ears. Nearby, the compass shattered, spraying her with glass. For a moment night became day as the creature glowed white hot, turning the frozen ocean about it to instant steam. Then, there was nothing.

The night regained its darkness. Bel'kovo rubbed her eyes. After the brightness from the creature, she was virtually blind in the twilight of the deck. Leaning over the rail all she could make out was a few charred planks of wood from the smashed whale boats, bobbing in the current. She made her way through the ship, past the ruined tryworks with its scalded sailors and petty officers directing dumbfounded men into the tops, where a fire had taken hold. She found the exhausted dwarf sailing master sat beside a blank, dejected Charnoslav, who held in his hand the black and burnt end of his harpoon line.



CHARNOSLAV DROVE the *Blagovashchenko* north under all available sail. Many had hoped that his lack of success with the ballista had proved that the venture was futile. It was the first time he had got a shot at the monster and the weapon had failed. The 'crazy captain' had met his match. There was no way this beast was going to let itself be towed into Erengard harbour. Several days passed with the crew in stunned silence. The tryworks were repaired and the fires re-lit; canvas covered the deck where the sailmaker was fashioning a new main upper topgallant. The first had been lost in the fire.

Strange storms, full of colour and bizarre lights came out of the west, giving the men more than enough to contend with. They were also preoccupied with the thought that the creature might come back. The idea that they were actually chasing the very same creature drove some of the men to distraction and, before long, the brawls and floggings began again.

Bel'kovo was on deck. Charnoslav had allowed her some time out of the cabin, escorted by the boatswain at all times. Her moody clerk stood nearby, next to the rail, his face a pale green with cold and sickness. The first mate, Uri, had the watch, with Hargund watching over the helm and providing a reassuring presence on the deck. The dwarf puffed on a large pipe, carved in the shape of a sea serpent. Charnoslav was conspicuous by his absence. He was usually on deck, even during the other mate's watches, either barking orders at the top of his voice or sulking morosely by the rail. Hargund had slipped something a little stronger into the captain's flask to help him sleep.

'Deck thar, sail on the weather bow.'

The lookout's call caught everyone out, including Arzenhammer. These were illegal waters and he knew of no one else that would brave them. Uri gave the dwarf a perplexed look, followed by a contorted snarl up into the tops, confirming his desire to have the blind lookout flogged for falling asleep.

'An experienced eye, I think, Mr Arzenhammer,' said Charnoslav walking up behind them, his face full of colour and confidence again. The dwarf hated heights and he was a poor climber. Charnoslav handed him a glass.

'You bugger,' Hargund snorted under his breath. Charnoslav managed a thin smile. It was the first bit of good humour they had shared in a little while. Watching the dwarf scramble his way clumsily into the crosstrees was amusing, but the unusual sighting played on Charnoslav's mind. If the vessel was here in any sort of official capacity they would have to turn and make a run for it, before she got a cannon shot off. Without a proper topgallant sail on the mainmast that would be difficult.

The dwarf came back down, his face awash with sweat. Taking out his large handkerchief he mopped himself down as he delivered his report. 'A pinnacle, two-masted and schooner rigged. She's a merchantman out of Erengard. Name's *Demetrius*.'

Charnoslav digested the information, 'Any signals?'

'No,' the dwarf replied. 'In fact there's very little of anything. No men on deck, but her sails are set. She's sailing erratically with the wind. Nobody on the helm.'

Charnoslav was quiet for a moment. Bel'kovo slipped in behind them. She had been listening to the sailing master's report. 'You are going to investigate, aren't you?'

'We have to hold our present course. We're losing time with the sail damage, as it is.'

'That vessel is in trouble. It needs our assistance. There's no one else out here,' Bel'Kovo pressed him.

'Miss Bel'kovo, that ain't my concern. We're hunting, we're on the trail. If a whaler abandoned a hunt every time she came across another ship, they'd never catch anything. That thing is heading north, and so are we.'

'They could have been attacked by that monster – like us.' Bel'Kovo decided to try a different tack, 'They may have information, sightings for you.'

Charnoslav hesitated for a moment. 'We weren't attacked, Miss Bel'kovo. We were reminded not to underestimate our quarry. If we'd been attacked then we'd be in little pieces floating south.'

'Sir, permission to—'

'Speak candidly?' Charnoslav interrupted. 'Do you do anything else, master dwarf?'

'She's right, captain. They may have been struck by an iceberg or anything. They could be sinking,' Hargund spoke evenly.

Charnoslav scowled: 'Is this because of the climb?'

A new voice entered the argument from the rail. It was Mendalstamm, his voice weak but thick with insolence. 'You have no choice, captain. The Paluga-Bel'kovo

Trading Company owns over half the men on this ship. One word from Miss Bel'kovo and they could turn this vessel around, which, after all, wouldn't be against their inclination.'

'I'd call that mutiny,' Charnoslav snapped.

Bel'kovo leant in closer to the captain. 'And I'd call it business.'



THE *DEMETRIUS* was deserted.

'Not a single soul, sir,' Denko informed him.

'What's she carryin'?'

'Nothing. Hold's empty, checked it meself.'

Charnoslav was troubled. The deck cabins had been hastily battened down using planks of wood. He had had Denko gain entrance with a boarding axe. Below decks the mystery had intensified. She was well provisioned with food and water and a sounding of the well proved that she wasn't sinking.

'They must have made a mistake and abandoned ship. A storm or something,' Bel'kovo ventured, rifling through the abandoned charts and navigation instruments. She had insisted on coming, as had Mendalstamm.

The topsails were damaged and the spanker torn to shreds in the perverse gales that had obviously tormented the vessel. 'That's as may be, but ar would've taken a sextant, maybe a map or somethin'. Wouldn't you, Miss Bel'kovo?' Charnoslav didn't try to hide his sarcasm. 'An I certainly would've taken a lifeboat.' Bel'kovo raised her eyebrows at Hargund, just returned from the stern with his toolbox, who confirmed Charnoslav's observation with a nod. The boat remained in the chains.

Charnoslav put his hands on the pinnacle's small wheel. Curiosity had brought him over to the merchantman. Both mates had offered to command the boarding party, but something had drawn Charnoslav to the vessel. Perhaps he

wanted to hear any reports of his prey first hand, or maybe he wanted to see the face of the captain who, like himself, was insane enough to sail in these doomed waters. He'd left the *Blagovaschenko* in Uri's capable, if brutal, hands and had taken the boatswain and four reliable sailors to crew the whaler's remaining gig.

Now that he was standing on the deck of the *Demetrius*, he wanted nothing more than to leave. The vessel had a strange emptiness that made Charnoslav feel uncomfortable. Almost as soon as he stepped on board, he felt the desire to return to his whaler with her flaking paint and stink of boiled blubber.

'I'll go check the captain's cabin, go through his papers,' Bel'kovo announced, but Charnoslav caught her by the arm.

'Now wait a minute, lassie. I've kept me part of the bargain. There's no crew, the vessel's in good shape. That porker's still out there, so if you'll excuse me I have a whale to catch. Stay if you wish.' Charnoslav moved to the rail. 'Boatswain, assemble your crew.'

'What about salvage?' called Mendalstamm, just loud enough to catch the ears of the returning sailors. He stood in the smashed doorway. He had been doing some calculations. Charnoslav shot him a menacing glance across the deck. He had had a bellyful of the clerk's interference.

'She's a fine vessel,' Bel'kovo ventured.

'I can't spare the crew to take her in. We're short of hands as it is. Besides, we can't fix that,' Charnoslav told him, pointing to the spanker. 'She'd slow our passage.'

'I think as we've established, the crew is our concern...' Mendalstamm did not get any further. Charnoslav went for the clerk, jamming his meaty forearm against the man's throat, pinning him to the shattered door. Mendalstamm writhed and choked as Denko, Hargund and two nearby sailors tried to prize the captain off him.

'Stop!' Bel'kovo screamed at them. 'Listen!'

The six men froze for a moment, A musket cracked. Charnoslav removed his arm from Mendalstamm's throat and let him crumble into the doorway. He

shrugged off the sailing master and his men and surged for the rail.

'Glass, now!' he ordered and Bel'kovo didn't argue with him. She handed him a battered brass telescope from a rack by the wheel. Charnoslav pointed the glass at the *Blagovashchenko* and had his fears confirmed. He heard several more musket shots, followed by small plumes of smoke that trailed like ribbons from the quarter deck. Impossibly, the crew had got into the weapons chest and stormed the ship. Without weapons any resistance to the mutiny would be futile.

'Captain, the yard arm.' Denko was beside him with another telescope. Moving his glass up from the deck Charnoslav caught sight of the yard arm, bearing two ropes and nooses: one for each of the whaler's mates. 'She's cutting her cable.' Denko swore. It was all over. Some of the men would have fought bravely, but they would have been no match for thirty armed and desperate convicts. Charnoslav had lost his ship and with it any possibility of acquiring his quarry.

'I'm sorry, captain,' said a stunned Bel'kovo, as she moved to the rail. The words came out as a strangled hiss, so she repeated herself. She was just beginning to realise the implications of the situation. What if the *Demetrius* was sinking? Charnoslav didn't move a muscle. He just stood and watched the whaler turn her stern towards him and set sail.

'Captain, what are we going to do?' asked Denko, his glass now by his side. Charnoslav looked around. Bel'kovo, Denko and the men were looking straight at him, half expecting some hysterical outburst of rage and frustration, but Charnoslav was well beyond that. Only Hargund looked out across the silvery waves, at the abandoned tryworks and ballista that were being pulled down and man-handled overboard by triumphant mobs.

Charnoslav wanted his ship back. Cold fury coursed through his veins and the others could see it. He strode across the deck to the wheel and consulted a tattered chart. Everything was silent, apart from the sound of Mendalstamm coughing downstairs.

'Mr. Arzenhammer, I'm going to need a schedule of repairs, starting with that spanker.'

'Aye, sir,' Hargund replied heading for the fo'c'sle, relieved that the captain had used his wrath to fuel some purpose. They needed him to keep it together. Marooned on an abandoned vessel at the top of the world, their survival depended upon it.

'I don't understand. Where are we going?' Bel'kovo asked, half expecting Charnoslav to put about and head north, after the monster in the tiny pinnacle.

'They're 'eading for Bilbali,' Charnoslav announced confidently, and began measuring times and distances with the compass, occasionally glancing up at the pale haze of the sun.

'How can you be so sure?' Bel'kovo asked him.

'You're a lubber an' you been sat in a rotting hulk on a frozen river for six months. You're wanted for insurrection and murder in over five principalities. You're goin' south. You're goin' to Estalia.'

'What are we going to do?' Bel'kovo asked.

'Give chase, lassie. Give chase.'

Bel'kovo shot the boatswain a glance but the hulking sailor merely shrugged his shoulders. Charnoslav scribbled some figures on a map with a stub of charcoal.

'Mr Denko, go below, find the ship's stores. Bring me as much canvas as you can lay yer hands on. We need to patch that sail.'

'Aye, sir.' The boatswain knuckled his forehead and disappeared below.

'All hands,' Charnoslav called, 'prepare to wear ship. I'll not lose this wind.'

'What do I do?' Bel'kovo asked, watching the sailors dash up the merchantman's slack rigging. Charnoslav thought for a moment.

'You can stay the hell out of me way!'



THE *DEMETRIUS* was a poor sailor. Charnoslav knew the weather and waters at the top of the world well, and was confident that he could overhaul the whaler, especially under an inexperienced mutineer commander and crew. The pinnacle was fast and manoeuvrable, despite the damaged spanker but the voyage south had been plagued with difficulties. The *Demetrius* felt unbalanced and sluggish to Charnoslav, for a vessel of its size, especially in ballast, without cargo. Hargund had commented, handkerchief tied in a bandanna around his head, in between the many repairs and reconfigurations that he had begun, that she was the worst vessel he had had the displeasure to sail in. To make matters worse, several unnatural storms that could not have been predicted by the dwarf had moved out of the north and seemed intent on catching the merchantman and blowing her off course.

Charnoslav was preoccupied with other matters. It could be weeks before they intercepted the *Blagovashchenko*. By then the whale could be a thousand leagues away and out of his reach. He had never been as close to catching and killing the beast, but with the passing of every dawn, sailing south, he realised that the monster may slip through his fingers forever.

Had he failed? Had he failed Yelena? While this horror of the seven seas swam and ate and fathered baby horrors, his sister was on the ocean floor, with the scavengers of the deep. He had been aboard the *Kraskovia* when he received the letter, reporting that the *Nord*, the transport Yelena had been travelling on, and her escort the *Martza* had gone down. Only later did he discover the full horror of her fate. There had been survivors. Charnoslav had found them. Horribly burnt and disfigured, twitching and thrashing in their beds at the Temple of Shallya. Between their screams they told him of an unnatural monster, a whale, twisted and malformed, that inexplicably attacked their vessel and breathed fire. Fire!

Charnoslav could not know if his sister burned or leapt to her death in the tempestuous waters that inevitably swallowed the shell of the transport, but when she came to him, in his dreams and nightmares, she was fleshless and crawling with crabs and hag fish.



BEL'KOVO FOUND Charnoslav where he had been stationed for the past four days, by the wheel making endless calculations and recalculations, furiously dedicated to catching his beloved vessel. What he had in mind, when they eventually sighted and caught up with the whaler, Bel'kovo could not guess but, from what she knew of Charnoslav, it would be bloody. This man killed sea monsters for a living. There would be no holding him back when he came face to face with the new captain of the *Blagovashchenko*.

She had other things on her mind beyond the murderous intentions of the captain. It was late and the polar sun had long dipped below the iceberg encrusted horizon. Bel'kovo needed some air. She needed time to think. She took both on the cramped poop deck.

She had done exactly as Charnoslav had ordered and stayed out of his way. She had spent most of her time in the cabin of the *Demetrius's* captain, inspecting the log and the paperwork. With the taking of the whaler and the precarious nature of their situation, Charnoslav and the crew had completely forgotten the strange circumstances in which they had boarded the merchantman in the first place. With nothing else to do, the disappearance of the *Demetrius's* crew played on Bel'kovo's mind and she became fully involved in rifling through the log entries and scraps of parchment that littered the captain's desk.

The log gave little away, being written in a terse, functional style. The entries outlined the vessel's swift progress but said nothing of its business in northern

waters. Following a recording of the vessel's sighting of pack ice, the entries skipped several days, in which Bel'kovo could only imagine that the captain was not on board. The log then recorded a succession of strange storms that hampered the ship's progress for several weeks, appearing as if out of nowhere and molesting the vessel. They disappeared just as fast, leaving the merchantman leagues off course each time.

Then she found the charter. It had been hidden in a compartment with other sensitive papers, in a bottom drawer. She was still clutching the crumpled piece of parchment in her hand as she paced the deck. She needed to tell someone. Charnoslav was the obvious choice. Their lives might be in danger.

It was bad timing for the captain, who was struggling with the wheel as wind and ice conspired to slam the tiny pinnacle into the side of a number of bergs that he had decided they had too little time to avoid. The wind had backed several points and the clouds had begun to boil above the tiny vessel.

'You need to see this,' Bel'kovo insisted, holding the charter under the wheel lamp. Her demand seemed odd in the silent darkness of the deck, especially since they had seen virtually nothing of each other for days.

'I'm a little busy, lass,' Charnoslav told her, straining at the helm. 'Boatswain!' he called. 'More hands to reef topsails.'

'I've found something.'

'What's that yer babblin' about?'

Denko came out of the gloom, his face unusually lined with worry. 'Beggin' your pardon, captain, I can't find Lev or Arkady.'

'What?' Charnoslav snapped, turning his head from Bel'kovo to his boatswain and back again, all the time fisting the wheel round.

'The *Demetrius* is under charter, to the Paluga-Bel'kovo Trading Company,' Bel'kovo continued as Charnoslav's eyebrows met in suspicious confusion. 'I promise you, I didn't know.'

'I've looked everywhere for 'em, captain.'

'It's all downstairs. My father's company processed your catches and grew fat on the profits. Some took more interest in the waste product, the impurities left behind after the process.'

'The dross?'

'Yes, they extracted a material they list as warpstone.'

Charnoslav knew something of warpstone.

'What do you want me to do, captain?' the boatswain persisted.

'Well, whatever it was, they were making a sizeable profit on the black market, enough to finance an expedition to acquire it from a more direct source.'

'An' when she didn't return...' Charnoslav ventured.

'Then we came out here looking for her.' It was Mendalstamm. He had been hiding in the shadows. Hargund was with him, his hands above his head.

'Sorry, captain,' Hargund rasped. Mendalstamm smashed the dwarf across the back of the skull with his pistol, sending him to the deck on his knees. The clerk was armed and he was smiling.

'Nicolai, what have you done?' Bel'kovo whispered.

Mendalstamm ignored her. 'She's right, you know. She didn't know anything, poor fool. Just following in daddy's footsteps.' The clerk stepped forward into the lamp light, waving his pistol casually at the four of them. 'He was a short-sighted fool as well.'

'He was wise not to have been involved in this,' Bel'kovo interjected, holding the scrunched up charter in her fist.

'Well, luckily we have more enlightened men than your father in the world. Men like Boris Paluga and his famous captain here,' Mendalstamm made a mock bow. 'It's thanks to this maniac that we've managed to recover our precious cargo. My compliments, captain. I couldn't persuade one single other vessel to come up here. It seems money doesn't talk in these parts.' He chuckled. 'Well, until now.'

'Cargo? What cargo? We're in ballast,' Charnoslav said grimly.

'Not quite, captain. You see, the cargo is the ballast.'

Charnoslav's mind whirled. The *Demetrius* sailed north, made a landing, unloaded her ballast and replaced it with several tons of raw warpstone from the top of the world. Warpstone that would make Boris Paluga far richer than whale oils, wax and scrimshaw ever could. Mendalstamm smiled smugly. 'We couldn't have the port authorities in Erengard discover our little secret, now could we? And we couldn't have Miss Bel'kovo or yourself ruining things when we got home, so I arranged for the *Blagovashchenko* to sail on without us.' He pulled a chain out of the top of his shirt. Around his neck the clerk was holding the key to the whaler's weapons chest. 'I forgot to thank you for the exclusive use of your cabin, captain.' Bel'kovo felt Charnoslav tense next to her and instinctively put a hand on his arm.

The boatswain made his move. Lurching forward he made a grab for the scheming clerk.

'No, Denko!' Charnoslav shouted. Mendalstamm looked terrified for a fleeting moment as the gigantic sailor came at him with his tree trunk arms. The pistol roared, lighting up the deck with its powder flash. The boatswain dropped awkwardly to the deck, his mighty heart beating its last. More by luck than judgement, Mendalstamm had shot him in the head.

The clerk took several steps back, shocked that he'd killed the sailor himself. He frantically began reloading the pistol and was surprised that Charnoslav or the dwarf wasn't already on top of him, smashing his head into the deck planking. Looking up he saw that Bel'kovo and the captain hadn't moved. They stood horrified, riveted to the spot, staring through him, rather than at him.

There was a long, drawn-out scream from aft. Then another, a horrible high pitched screeching from the bows. Pavel and Orekh, the master's mate, were dead.

Mendalstamm turned around. He was surrounded by several large dark shapes, skulking and twitching in the shadows. Bel'kovo and Charnoslav had seen them in the pistol flash. Their overgrown claws

scraped on the deck as they cautiously moved in. Their thick black fur was matted with old blood and crawled with obscenely bloated fleas and ticks. The clerk screamed in terror, causing the pack to retract for a moment. Their ears and noses twitched horribly, caressing the deck with their huge whiskers. They were rats, monstrous in size and proportion, homing in on the scent of warm blood. Their dead eyes glazed over in the lamp light and their lips curled back to reveal teeth that could gnaw through the hull of a ship.

They all leapt together, their grotesquely lean bodies and scaly tails swarming all over the shrieking Mendalstamm. Hargund lurched to his feet. Leaning against the mast he pulled a boarding axe from the rack and swung it experimentally at several of the giant vermin working their way round to him.

'Go!' he stormed as the rats closed in. Charnoslav didn't wait to hear the dwarf's screams, or his own. He furiously spun the wheel starboard and grabbed Bel'kovo by the arm. She was limp with fear and offered no resistance. Charnoslav made a dash across the deck, but was halted by the sight of four more of the monstrous brutes closing in from the bow. Drawing his scrimshaw blade the captain slashed at a mizzen line. Dropping the knife he grasped the frayed cro'jack yard line in one hand and Bel'kovo in the other. They shot up through the rigging and canvas, braced hard against the wind. Below them the rats thrashed and scratched at each other as their prey disappeared before their very whiskers.

As the damaged spanker crashed to the deck in a heap the line stopped abruptly. Charnoslav's rough hand slipped along Bel'kovo's slender arm and they snatched at each other, holding on with cupped fingers.

'Don't you let go of me!' Bel'kovo gasped in the odd, black silence of the tops. The captain groaned as various forces tore at his body. He began to swing the alarmed Bel'kovo slightly to give them some momentum, until, after several attempts she managed to grab onto the crosstrees. It had been years since Charnoslav had been in the nosebleeds

and he prayed that his old agility and confidence had not abandoned him. Looking below he saw that the rats had begun to tentatively crawl up into the rigging. He could count about twenty of the giant creatures, but was sure that he could see far more black bodies slipping onto the deck through the forehatch from the hold. Hargund was dead. They would be up to them before long.

'Go,' the captain growled, out of breath. 'Keep climbing, lassie.'

'Are you insane?' Bel'kovo spluttered, oblivious to the irony of the question. She had no time to argue, however. Charnoslav was right behind her, forcing her up toward the masthead.

'Don't look down, just keep going, as fast as you can.'

'What are they?' Bel'kovo demanded as she scrambled up the rigging, trying desperately not to think about the distance between her body and the deck.

'Rats, lassie. You'll find vermin in every ship's hold from here to Tobaró,' Charnoslav informed her.

'What?' she called down, then wished she hadn't. The captain put a hand on her back to steady her. 'The warpstone must have changed them. They grew, and they grew hungry.' Charnoslav could suddenly feel extra weight on the ratlines below him. Climbing past Bel'kovo he plucked her from the rigging and heaved her up into the crow's nest. She knelt in the masthead, digging her nails into the wood. She was clearly terrified. Every wave and trough that the merchantman struck shivered up the mainmast, reminding Bel'kovo that she was sickeningly far above the ship. All around them the sky was lit up by red and green lightning, as one of the bizarre storms that they had become accustomed to, opened up above the merchantman.

'What's the point, then?' she screamed at Charnoslav with sudden anger. 'We're dead.' Charnoslav crawled in awkwardly beside her, taking one last look down the trunk of the mast, where eight or nine rats were weaving their way up through the rigging.

'Not quite,' Charnoslav tried to reassure her in a resigned tone that was anything but reassuring. 'Hold on.'

'What?' Bel'kovo seethed. 'Why?'

'Because lassie, you're about to find out what happens to a ship when she strikes an iceberg.'

Despite the height, Bel'kovo spun violently around. There she was. One of the colossal icebergs Charnoslav had been trying to avoid, right in the path of the *Demetrius*.

'You're insane,' she hissed at the captain.

'Quite probably,' Charnoslav answered as he heard the bowsprit splinter against the ice and felt the shockwave pass through the ship.



CHARNOSLAV AWOKE. He was cold, but he was alive. All of a sudden there was light and he realised that he had opened his crusty lids. His head hurt, as did his arm which he discovered was broken when he tried to move it.

'You're awake,' came a familiar voice. It was Bel'kovo. She was beside him, helping him to sit up. He could hear crackling, but could see little. His eyes felt sensitive, everything was too bright. 'You gave me quite a fright. I thought you were going to leave me out here all alone.'

He could make out her face now, bruised and smeared with dried blood, but she was surrounded by a bright white light, like a spirit, and he began to suspect that they were both dead. She put something cold to his lips. Ice. He crunched and swallowed it, realising how thirsty he was.

Bel'kovo stood up and became a blur again. He followed her with his eyes and felt them begin to improve. They were on the iceberg.

It began to come back to him. The *Demetrius* struck the iceberg at high speed, shattering her prow and toppling her masts. The wall of ice reduced the pinnacle to toothpicks, ripping up her decking and cracking open her hull. Her diabolical

cargo had sunk down into the depths, where it belonged. The sails collapsed, snaring the monsters below and pinning them to the smashed merchantman as she sank below the waves. The mizzen top gave way and hit the water with a force Charnoslav couldn't have anticipated, knocking the captain senseless.


'How long...' Charnoslav croaked, but Bel'kovo couldn't hear him. He looked around. She had been busy. He found himself at the centre of a small makeshift camp. She had erected a shelter made of canvas to keep out the worst of the searing wind. The odd cask and barrel littered the camp, as did several pieces of smashed equipment. Best of all a small fire burnt near a pile of driftwood. Bel'kovo returned from the edge of the berg, where warmer waters had already begun to slosh against the solid ice. She was holding an armful of wood and cordage. 'How long have I been out?' Charnoslav asked again.

'A few days,' Bel'kovo confirmed. 'We're going south, I think. I hope. Last day or so, pieces of wood started to wash up on the berg and drift by. I've gathered what I can, anything that I thought might be useful.' She flashed the whites of her eyes at him and sat down on the cask, dumping the wood beside him. 'This,' she indicated to the cask, 'is salted meat.' She seemed excited and beautiful. 'How lucky was that?'

Bel'kovo's smile faded as an unusual sound filled the crisp air around them. It was deep and resonant and seemed to travel through the iceberg and their bodies. 'What's that?' she enquired, her eyes looking everywhere.

'It's a whale,' Charnoslav informed her and laid a reassuring hand on her wrist. They were safe on the iceberg. She smiled and left the camp to continue her foraging. Charnoslav sat with his pain but was glad to be alive, the bright white of the iceberg lifting his spirits. Then it caught his eye. There was a name on one of the charred pieces of wood that Bel'kovo had dropped beside him.

The *Blagovashchenko*.

His ship. Charnoslav polished the nameplate with a damp sleeve and chuckled to himself quietly. 

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR RACONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

...AND SOME COME TO EASE THEIR TROUBLED HEADS.

I NEED A ROOM FOR THE NIGHT.

AND A BEER.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

TH-THAT'S TWO SHILLINGS, AND THE ROOM WILL BE TH-THIRTY.

YOU SEEM NERVOUS. GUILTY CONSCIENCE?

N-NOT MANY WITCH HUNTERS COME IN HERE.

AT TWO SHILLINGS A PINT, I'M NOT SURPRISED.

WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE THIS EVENING?

THE CHAPTER-HOUSE IS FULL. AND I HAVE A STORY THAT DESERVES A WIDER AUDIENCE.

A STORY AND A WARNING.

'MY NAME IS ERWIN RHINEHART, BUT THIS IS MAGNUS KOPF'S STORY - A WITCH HUNTER, YOUNG, AMBITIOUS AND MY FRIEND.

'SENT TO HEAD UP THE CHAPTER-HOUSE IN WURTBAD, HIS FIRST DISCOVERY WAS AN UNPLEASANT ONE.'

THE CHAPTER OWES GOLD TO EVERY MERCHANT IN TOWN. IF WE CAN'T PAY SOON, WE'LL HAVE TO SELL THE CHAPTER-HOUSE.

I WON'T LET THAT HAPPEN. THERE MUST BE A WAY.

The Tale of Magnus Kopf



ALBERTUS - ALL THE FOLLOWERS OF CHAOS WE ARREST MUST FORFEIT THEIR PROPERTY TO THE EMPIRE'S REPRESENTATIVES - US.

SO WE CAN DESTROY IT. IT'S TAINTED! INFECTED!

THE LAW DOESN'T SAY THAT. WE'LL BLESS IT, SELL IT AND PAY OUR DEBTS.



FOR THE GREATER GOOD.



'THE NEXT WEEK, THEY ARRESTED A WINE-MERCHANT FOR CHAOS-WORSHIP.'

KLODWIG ESSER WILL FORGET OUR DEBT IN EXCHANGE FOR THE SIXTY WINE-CASKS IN THAT VILLAIN'S WAREHOUSE.

WAIT - WHY GIVE HIM ALL THE WINE, THEN PAY FULL PRICE WHEN WE WANT A DRINK? SAY YOU MISCOUNTED, AND TAKE TWO CASKS TO THE CHAPTER-HOUSE.



LORD SIGMAR, LET THIS FOOD AND WINE FORTIFY OUR BODIES AND MINDS, TO BEGIN A NEW GOLDEN AGE FOR THE WURTBAD CHAPTER AND ITS HOLY WORKS.



'SOME SAY THAT WAS THE NIGHT THE POWER WENT TO KOPF'S HEAD.

'NOT POWER.

'AS IT HAD BEGUN, KOPF'S WORK WENT ON.'



...WE SENTENCE MARTEN BRAUN THE SWORDMAKER TO DEATH, HIS PROPERTY FORFEIT...

...WE SENTENCE KLODWIG ESSER THE WINE-MERCHANT...

FOR CONSORTING WITH DARK POWERS, WE SENTENCE OTTO SCHWARTZ THE HORSE-TRADER TO DEATH, HIS PROPERTY FORFEIT TO THE EMPIRE...

...ROLF VON HAGEN THE GOLDSMITH...



THE CONSPIRATORS ARE DEAD, THEIR SCHEMES RUINED. A GREAT WORK, BROTHERS.

AND OUR DEBTS ARE PAID. BUT BROTHER MAGNUS, THE TOWN COUNCIL IS UNEASY ABOUT YOUR METHODS. NOW OUR WORK IS DONE-

THE COUNCIL? I AM THE HEAD OF THIS CHAPTER-HOUSE! AND I SAY OUR WORK IS NOT DONE.

IT HAS BARELY STARTED.

'THE ARRESTS, BURNINGS AND CONFISCATIONS CONTINUED. MAGNUS'S STATUS GREW, AS DID HIS RUTHLESSNESS.'

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? LEAVE HER! SHE'S NO WITCH!

HER FATHER IS A FOLLOWER OF CHAOS. SHE MUST BE RE-EDUCATED.

'WURTBAD HAD NOT SEEN THIS FACE OF MAGNUS BEFORE. NOR HAD THE WITCH-HUNTERS.'

OUR LEADER HAS A HEAD FOR FIGURES, I'LL GRANT. BUT THIS IS BAD.

KLAUS BRENNER WAS A GOOD SIGMAR-FEARING MAN. NOW HE'S DEAD AND MAGNUS HAS HIS GOLD - AND HIS DAUGHTER. AND HE'S NOT THE FIRST.

MAGNUS HAS BECOME BIG-HEADED AND TWO-FACED. I'VE SEEN HIS CORRUPTION. HE'S FORGING EVIDENCE TO STEAL MEN'S PROPERTY.

NOK!
NOK!

IN SIGMAR'S NAME!

DROP THE WHIP AND RELEASE THE GIRL.

BROTHERS! HAVE YOU COME TO JOIN ME? HAVE YOU LEARNED TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE?

HE MUST BE STOPPED. WE WILL SPEAK WITH HIM TONIGHT.

...NO, YOU WOULD BEDEVIL ME WITH YOUR LITTLE THOUGHTS. AND THAT WILL NOT DO.

YOU FOUR-EYED SNIVELLER! YOU RUN, BUT WE ARE MORE ALIKE THAN YOU KNOW!

ALBERTUS RAN ALL THE WAY TO ALTDORF.

AND THEY SENT ME.



THE END

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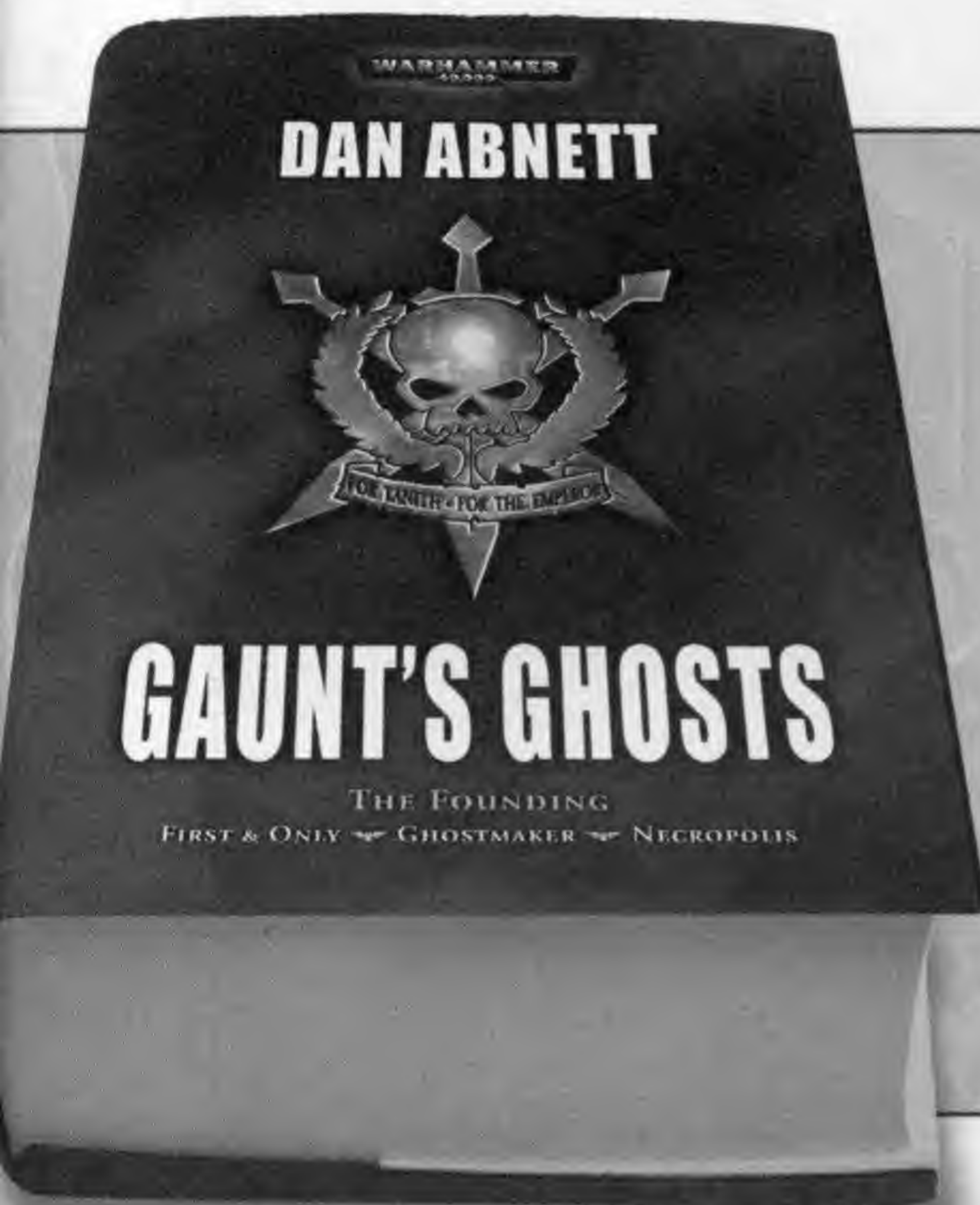
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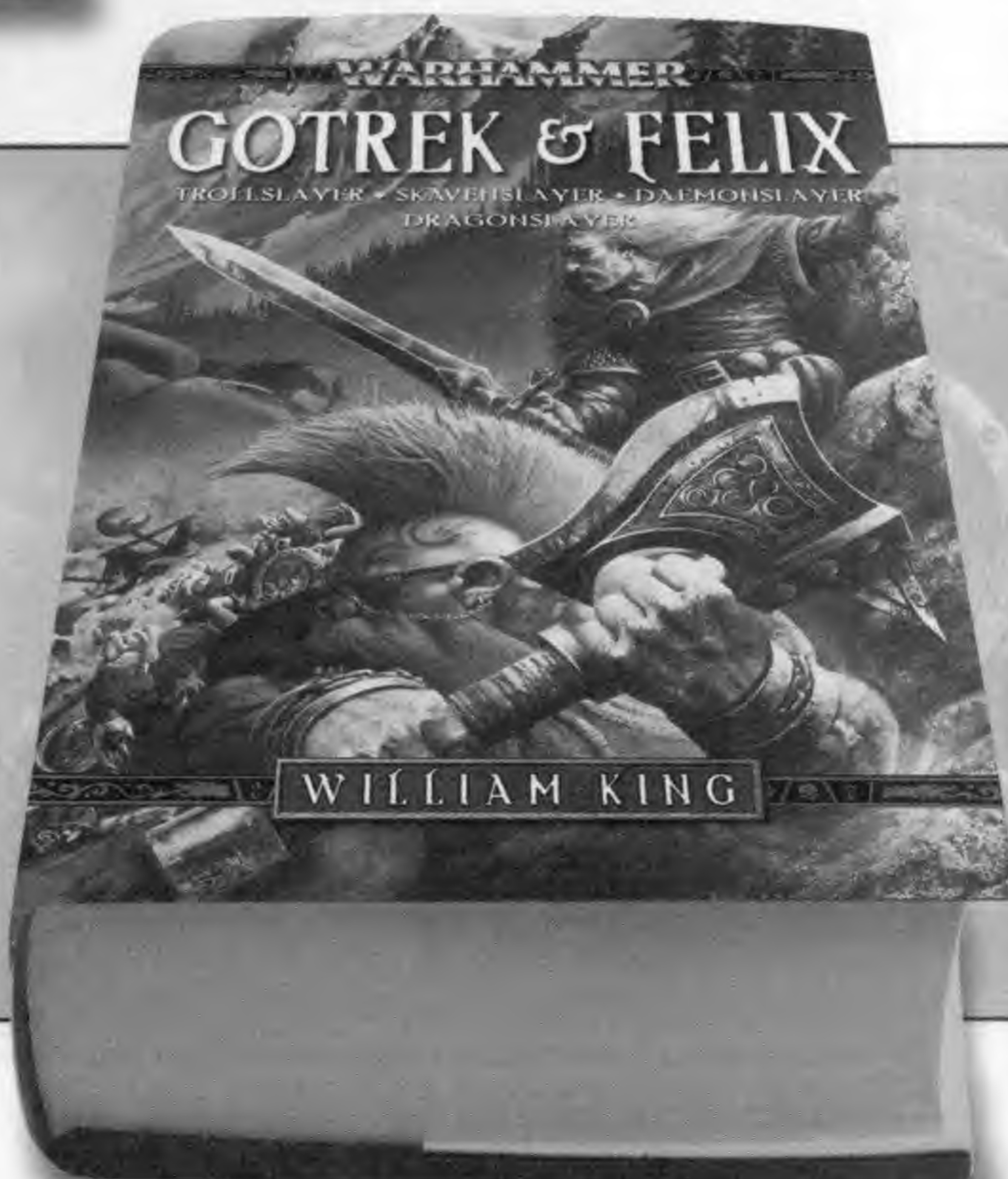
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PLAGUE SHIP

A DOOM EAGLES STORY

BY JIM ALEXANDER

BROTHER CAPTAIN Torrus awoke as if from a shimmering dream. He crouched low, swinging his bolter around in a wide arc, watchful for danger and alert to his comrades as they materialized around him. He winced as a loud, dull boom reverberated around the tight confines of the corridor. The wall to his left seemed to quiver, as if something of tremendous power had collided with it on the other side. Torrus's heart sank. He had seen this happen once before: one of his brother Doom Eagles had teleported directly into the ship's hull.

'Abort the teleport! Confirm! Can you confirm?' Torrus had no idea if he still had vox contact with the Doom Eagles' strike cruiser, *The Mournful Passage*, from where he had teleported only seconds earlier. In his ear he could hear nothing but an insect buzz of static. Something was playing havoc with both teleporters and comms. All he could do was hope that his message got through.

He blanched at the thought of another group porting into the wrong place and being slammed out of existence. The crackle in his ear cleared slightly, he could just make out the words. 'Mess re- Mess- ed...' Torrus filled in the blanks: *Message received*. No more Marines would be sent in. Torrus closed his eyes and gave silent thanks to the Emperor.

Three Marines stood around him, bolters trained down the empty, featureless corridor: Ulcaca and Vidus, and the apothecary, Makindlus. The drab interior of the Imperial Navy troop transporter, *The Deliverance*, weighed down on them.

Torrus broke the silence. 'We're on our own,' he said. 'It's not safe to send anyone else down.' He was aware that their minds would be on the fifth man in their number, whose molecules now made up part of the ship's superstructure. It would have been a quick death, but unworthy for such a brave warrior. Torrus knew he could rely on his men not to dwell on it. They were battle seasoned, frontline troops who'd seen action at close quarters. Plenty of unmarked ork graves could testify to that.

'Sir, what about the first squad?' Ulcaca asked.

'They are on board,' Torrus replied. 'But not here. The transporter malfunctioned and vox contact is down. Our target is at least a kilometre away, possibly more. Let's get moving before every plague zombie on board realises we're here.'



DEEPER INSIDE the ship, the second group of Doom Eagles made ready to undertake the mission. Brothers Stellus and Balbolca trained their heavy bolters down the length of a vast room and Brothers Althulca and Nibus stood to one side, the pilot lights of their heavy flamers casting a blue glow onto the grey walls. Techmarine Callinca stood behind them, taking stock of their situation. Lines of crates stretched for what seemed like forever in front of them. Their sides had been seared by las-bolts. 'Has someone been hunting for rats?' Stellus enquired dryly.

'Perhaps,' Callinca said. 'Or maybe it is evidence of the last stand of the hunted.'

It was deathly quiet and still. Stellus levered open a crate and peered inside. 'Medical supplies,' he said.

'We're in one of the holds. I'd say all of the crates in this section hold medical supplies. Another will hold provisions, and so on. All intended to follow the drop-ships down once the Imperial Guard had set up base in Cadia.' Callinca was aware of the others' restlessness. He wasn't a leader of men by choice. He preferred detail. 'We know another group of Marines ported in with us, but they aren't here, and something's blocking communications.' He paused, considering the implications of his next words. 'We're alone – for now, anyway – but we're both heading for the same location.' He looked directly upwards. 'Which is that way.'

Balbolca gripped his heavy bolter, Althulca brought his flamer to attention.

'Right,' Callinca said, checking that his bolter, knives and explosives were secure in their holsters. 'Let's find the logic array.'



TORRUS'S SQUAD had been slowly negotiating the cramped transporter's corridors for almost half an hour when Vidus broke formation.

'What is this?' Vidus strode over to where a black slimy substance had gathered on the ship's walls. The motors in his armour whined and clicked. They seemed very loud against the silence.

The apothecary, Makindlus, joined him and scraped some of the substance into a dish. Spindles of slime stuck to the top and bottom, lending it an unnatural elasticity. As was the case with all Doom Eagle apothecaries, Makindlus's expertise extended to disease and contaminants.

'Conjecture?' Torrus prompted.

'A taint of some kind, a dark infection,' Makindlus said, his voice betraying his distaste. 'At the very least it has a foothold on this ship. I would not be surprised if such forces are responsible for the disruption to our teleporter.' He dropped the dish and fired a controlled burst from his flamer at it. 'There is something on this ship that requires cleansing.' The slime bunched into a ball and began to shrivel and smoke.

'It is our appointed task to make this possible,' Torrus said. His men nodded, aware of the import of their mission. Torrus's face hardened with a grim smile. They were ready.

Vox contact had deteriorated. The crackling inside Torrus's helmet had given way to feedback, a strangled shriek – the sound of dying. Torrus turned it off. The four of them were on their own now. He hoped the Emperor would be kind, that they would meet up with the first group and complete their mission in good time.

The Marines stalked down the corridor, leaving only silence in their wake.



CALLINCA PUT HIS finger to his lips as he halted his squad at a junction in the corridor. The other power armoured figures instantly stopped dead and, with a sixth sense earned over decades of service together, assumed a holding formation, all weapons trained to provide covering fire for their techmarine sergeant should the need arise.

The five Marines stood motionless, their enhanced senses probing for any sign of danger.

Skkkktch!

In unison the Marines' eyes all swept towards Callinca. There was an uneasy pause as the Astartes awaited further orders.

Skkkktch!

The noise was louder this time; its source was moving ominously closer to the Doom Eagles' position. With his squad's eyes still firmly transfixed on him, Callinca motioned first towards Balbolca and then towards the intersecting corridor. The heavy weapons operator gave a slight nod and, muttering a quiet prayer to the Emperor to bless his aim, sprang around the bend and trained his weapon on the target.

His brother Marines reacted and began to move into the gap vacated by Balbolca but checked themselves when the familiar report of his weapon was not forthcoming. Callinca thought for a moment that the Marine had frozen there in terror. The arch-enemy employed horrors that could strike fear into even the most faithful of the Emperor's servants.

'Rats!' Balbolca said, a grin forming on his lips as he lowered his heavy bolter. 'It was just a couple of rats.'

A palpable wave of relief washed over the squad.

'It may have just been rats this time but stay alert, brothers,' Callinca said, also bringing down his weapon.

Then the corridor roof above them gave way, spewing forth a tide of unholy abominations.



STANDING AT A doorway, Captain Torrus tried to make sense of the flickering shadows on the wall, before finally deciding that they were just that, shadows. He motioned his men forward with his plasma pistol. They followed him into a cramped cabin. Bunks were riveted onto the otherwise bare walls and blankets were strewn on the ground. A lamp lay smashed on the floor.

Makindlus noticed scratch marks on the floor. He stooped down and picked up a broken fingernail. 'Either somebody was dragged out,' he said, 'or something crawled out.'

They moved back out into the corridor. More black slime was forming on the walls and oozing down to form brackish puddles on the floor. Lamps flickered erratically. 'This is a ghost ship,' Vidus said. The remark was greeted with silence. He rounded a corner and halted. He held up his hand. 'Bodies.' He edged forward cautiously.

The nearest one was lying in a crumpled heap, arms outstretched. Vidus could not see its face. Makindlus moved forward while Vidus kept his bolter trained on the body. He dropped to one knee and examined it. 'Note the overalls. It's Imperial crew standard,' he said. The smell of decaying flesh sought to overwhelm the apothecary's senses. Years of training blocked it out. 'Subject has been dead for days, perhaps weeks.' He removed a scalpel from his armour. 'Let's see...'

He turned the corpse over. The face – what was left of it – was a silent scream of agony. He cut away the uniform and made an incision from below the chin, down to the chest. Thick, brown liquid leaked from the wound and the stench of

death worsened. 'The body shows no sign of desiccation.' He held the scalpel over the pilot light on his flamer and placed it close to the black slick. It bubbled and popped. Makindlus turned to his comrades, letting the body fall back onto the floor.

'It's impossible—'

At his feet, the corpse rolled over and sat up, its eyes snapped open and with a chilling groan emanating from its slack jaw, it wrapped its arms around Makindlus's helmet, ragged fingers scrabbling to pull it off. Makindlus let out a cry of surprise and grabbed his attacker by the hair. It came away in his hand. He stood up and knocked the creature onto the floor. He backed away as the other Marines formed up around him.

'Plague zombie,' he said.

The undead thing turned to face Makindlus. The overalls had been torn away in the fight and its body was visible. It pulsed, and whole sections of skin burst like overactive pupae from their cocoons. The zombie was riddled with wounds which leaked mucus and pus; skin hung loose like ancient parchment. Its lips smacked open, exhaling whatever air remained in the lungs. The loud rasping sigh of the undead. It lurched forward, lopsidedly shambling towards the tight knot of Marines. Behind it, other bodies scraped and staggered into life.



BOLTER SHELLS punctured through the zombie's chest and mouth sending it crashing into a storage crate; diseased crooked fingers tried to protect an orifice that was no longer there. Techmarine Callinca stood over the creature that lay quivering at his feet, he snarled in distaste. A shot to the head and all movement ceased.

So far resistance had been light with only small groups of zombies that the squad despatched quickly. But all were mindful of the growing danger. The deeper they moved into the ship, the more

likely it was that they would meet concentrated packs of zombies. After a tense, fifteen minute march they reached the end of the corridor. A lift, closed off with metal shutters stood before them. Callinca examined the door mechanism. 'Power is on standby,' he said, 'but it's on a relay. Calling the lift will open the shutters.'

The sound of scratching and tapping emanated from the other side of the doors.

'They're in the shaft,' Callinca said. 'If we call the lift the shutters may open and we run the risk of losing our sterilised environment.' There was a moment's contemplation. 'Of course, we're here to do a job.' He pressed the button. Far above, the lift platform began its slow descent, protesting all the way. A red light blinked on above the doors. 'They are on a timer. Be ready'

The squad levelled their bolters at the door, expecting them to open at any second, unleashing whatever monstrosities lurked in the lift shaft.

The sound of the approaching lift grew louder. Callinca kept his eyes on the red light.

The tapping on the other side got heavier. The lift screeched on its runners.

There was a wet, cracking sound and the tapping ceased. The light turned green and the doors slid open. Althulca and Nibus swapped quizzical glances.

'It's not very big, is it?' said Althulca.

'Only room for two at a time,' Nibus added.

'Lack of time is the essence of the problem,' Callinca said. 'We must make do.' He motioned to the two heavy bolter Marines. 'Stellus and Balbolca, you first. Your orders are to secure the area, then clear a path to the logic array.' Callinca hesitated as he gathered his thoughts. There was something else he wanted to say. 'Just watch each other's back.'

The two Marines nodded before stepping into the lift. It trundled noisily into life, but progress up was as painfully slow as it was down. Callinca, left behind with Stellus and Balbolca, glanced at the lights over the shutters. Still red.

Behind them a door began to shake on its hinges.

'They've found a way around,' Stellus said tonelessly. 'Let's hope the lift keeps working.'



'STEP BACK, Makindlus.' Torrus, Ulcaca, and Vidus moved forward, a solid line of armour, filling the corridor width. They took aim and opened fire. 'Shoot them in the head,' Torrus ordered.

Sustained gunfire ripped into the zombies. The first to fall was the one examined by Makindlus. Shells ripped into its cheek and cranium, piercing its brain. Torrus's plasma pistol hissed wildly, puncturing the walking abominations and boiling their innards. A shot to the eye downed one in an explosion of brown mucus. The zombies advanced, ignoring the withering fire that was smashing them apart. The last was blasted to fleshy pieces barely a metre away from the bolter muzzles. Silence descended. Smoke drifted. First contact with the crew had been made.

Makindlus surveyed the bodies and broken limbs that carpeted the floor. 'Corrupted by the machinations of Abbadon's Black Crusade,' he said. 'Fallen to the Plague of Unbelief. These men were weak-minded and short of faith in the Emperor. This is their reward...' The apothecary aimed his flamer. 'They were waiting for any fresh flesh to come their way.'

'I'd say they found us a touch too fresh.' Torrus reached out and stayed Makindlus's hand. 'Don't waste your flamer on them; let's save what firepower we have.'

The corridor led Torrus and his men to the ship's canteen. Inside were a dozen crewmen, seated, heads slumped over, struck down by the contaminant without warning or prejudice. The uneaten remains of their last meals lay before them.

'Under the circumstances, I'll forego the customary inspection,' Makindlus said.

Torrus raised his hand and they all fell silent. Above their heads a scratching sound broke the quiet. Torrus followed the noise, gesturing for his men to spread out. It was coming from the ventilation shaft. The Marines aimed their weapons. The scratching got louder. The grate fell open and clattered onto the ground. Torrus and his men trained their guns at the darkness of the opening, muscles coiled.

'If you can understand me,' Torrus said, 'show yourself.'

Something was tossed out of the shaft. It landed at Torrus's feet. 'A rosarius,' he said. 'Hold fire.' The Marines relaxed, all eyes on the ventilation hatch.

Torrus's command was premature. All the crewmen in the room rose up as one; chairs tipped over. Two lurched towards Vidus, mouths braided with thick saliva yawned open. With hollow rasps both emptied their stomachs at him. Columns of grey projectile vomit splattered onto the Marine's chest plate. The hot steaming liquid ate into the armour. Vidus tried to wipe away the acid, his hands scrabbling furiously. Ulcaca stepped in with bolter blazing, blasting the zombies into oblivion.

More zombies descended on Makindlus. 'I'm standing my ground on this one,' he said, as great plumes of fire poured out of his flamer. The inferno stripped the little flesh from the zombies' decaying faces. It enveloped bone and organs that burst in hissing fountains.

A trio of zombies staggered towards Torrus. Three plasma shots – three twitching zombies at his feet. There followed a reflex action as a gnarled hand grabbed his ankle. Torrus stamped on the arm with his other leg, cracking bones.

It was over in seconds. Vidus stood in the corner, checking his armour. He looked up and nodded that he was fine; the vomit had stopped short of eating through to the skin, but he was more vulnerable now. The Imperial aquila had all but gone, and his chest plate steamed hot vapours.

A rough cough sounded from the ventilation shaft. The Marines snapped back into combat stances. 'Whoever you

are, show yourself or we will open fire,' barked Torrus.

'No! I'm not one of them!' a voice, raw and taut, said. 'Thank the Emperor you've found me!'

'We are Sixth Company of the Emperor's own Doom Eagles,' Torrus said. 'I request you show yourself, or suffer the consequences.'

There first appeared a filthy hand, then an equally unwashed man's face. Humanity sparkled in the eyes. 'Emperor be praised, I am pleased to see you!' he said.

Ulcaca and Vidus helped the man down. He scurried towards the rosarius on the floor and picked it up, kissed it, and placed it inside his robes. Torrus's gaze never left him, studying him for any tell-tale signs. The Plague could strike at any moment.

'Who are you?' Torrus enquired.

'My name is Shota Klos, ship's chaplain,' he said. He patted his chest. 'This crest is my mark of faith,' he explained. 'I mean you no kind of harm.'

'Well, chaplain,' Torrus said, as he stood amongst the dead and disjointed plague zombies littering the canteen floor like so many puppeteers' cast-offs, 'it would seem you have lost your flock.'

The chaplain stared at a fallen zombie. A thick paste trickled down the hole in its forehead. Its eyes were as lifeless and its mouth as slack as they had been when it was on its feet. 'That it has come to this,' the chaplain sighed. 'It was two weeks ago – on our first day of transit. Some of the crew and Imperial Guard investigated a disturbance in one of the drop-ships. When they came out again they were not... themselves.'

'Something of an understatement,' Torrus remarked.

'A drop-ship, you say?' Makindlus assumed the role of chief negotiator.

The chaplain bowed his head. 'Yes,' he said gravely.

The Deliverance accommodated an entire regiment of Imperial Guard and their own drop-ships, kept in the hold. When the time came for battle, the Guardsmen would board the ships ready for ejection down onto the planet's surface. They

would form an integral part of the war effort for the liberation of the Cadian system. That had been the plan, at least.

Makindlus grasped the implications. 'If this transporter continues on its course it is set to crash into the Cadian system. If it strikes an inhabited world, the zombie army would be free to infect the planet's population.'

It was the worst-case scenario, but entirely plausible. Torrus was listening intently. 'A ready-made invasion army of the Black Crusade,' he said.

Makindlus addressed the chaplain. 'That rosarius may mark you as one of the Emperor's representatives on board the ship, but are you a pious man?'

'My faith in the Emperor is what has kept me safe in this terrible time,' the chaplain said. 'But that is not really what you are asking me, is it, apothecary?'

Makindlus got to the point. 'It would perhaps be of assistance if you could explain how, in these past weeks, you have avoided being ripped to pieces?'

The chaplain took a long, steady breath. His face seemed to change as he did so, ageing and becoming tired. 'I have seen so much atrocity. The ship's crew were like kindling to feed a raging fire, and the abominations were everywhere.' He swallowed. 'Such savagery, such terrible cruelty. I survived by hiding and playing dead when the zombies were near. I took whatever sustenance I could and used the ventilation system to move around.'

Torrus held the chaplain by his shoulders. 'Chaplain – if that is who you truly are – look at me!' The captain's gaze burned into the chaplain's for several seconds. 'I am satisfied that you have not succumbed to plague. Not yet. But be warned, as Doom Eagles, our vigilance is unsurpassed. If you show any sign of contagion, we will not hesitate to eliminate you.'

Torrus released the chaplain, who closed his eyes in silent prayer. 'My faith in the Emperor's eternal wisdom has never wavered. I knew help would arrive with a means to cleanse this ship of all dark taint. And now you have come!'

'We are the means to that end, but not the end in itself,' Torrus said. 'The logic array is on this level but a kilometre away. We will have to negotiate the accommodation decks.'

The chaplain opened his eyes and smiled. 'There is a better way,' he said.



CALLINCA LISTENED as the lift, far above, ground to a halt. They all waited. Nothing happened. He was about to speak when the angry bark of a bolter ricocheted down the lift shaft.

'Battle has been joined,' he whispered, punching the button to recall the lift. 'We must join our brothers as soon as we can.'

The storage lift began its torturous descent. The staccato report of repeated bolter fire continued to echo from the level above, and something was interfering with the vox link. The banging on the door increased. The Marines looked up as one. Clearly discernable under the screech of the lift and the sound of gunfire were the war cries of Stellus and Balbolca.

In the momentary distraction the door burst open revealing a plague zombie mob. They hurled themselves at the Marines. Such was the weight of numbers that they threatened to overwhelm them. For a moment, Callinca stood transfixed, not able to keep his eyes off them. He could see Imperial Guard uniforms among the writhing, volatile mass. Rotting hands grabbed, pushed and clawed.

Behind them the lift doors ground open. Althulca and Nibus hesitated, unwilling to get in.

'Securing the level above is the only priority – you both go now!' Callinca shouted, part of him surprised at the conviction in his voice. He might become a leader of men yet. Callinca pushed them into the lift and hit the button. The doors closed.

Now very much alone, the Techmarine steeled himself for what was to come. The zombies were staggering forwards, intent on ripping him to pieces.

They were relentless. The Techmarine discharged one round after another, doing all he could to keep the horde at bay. When his gun emptied, he drove it with such strength as to skewer an oncoming zombie's gullet.

Above the noise he heard the lift reach the upper level, pause, then begin the slow journey down.

He had no choice but to handle them at close range. A zombie bared its broken teeth. Callinca pushed his bolt pistol into its mouth and squeezed the trigger. Another two drooling creatures lunged at him. The Techmarine plunged his long knife at such an angle as to impale both heads. Both twitched violently, the spasms jolting up Callinca's arm. He twisted, and a stream of slick splatter splashed onto his shoulder.

Time stood still. Another head shot, another felled zombie, but Callinca was down to his last pistol round. Flying vomit narrowly missed his visor. He could see another zombie mob heading his way. He was running out of time, and he knew it. He cursed under his breath. As a techmarine, he was the one holding the charges. A shower of acid vomit splattered onto his chest plate and helmet. He could feel the skin tighten around his cheekbones – the acid had eaten through parts of his helmet. He was exposed. He rode the pain, primed the charges and lobbed them into the advancing rabble. The zombies in the blast radius pirouetted and separated into wet slabs.

Callinca was grabbed around the neck, he ploughed his knife through the top of the zombie's skull. It released its grip and collapsed, convulsing, to the ground. Still there were more. Screaming his defiance, knives in both hands, he sliced in wide frantic arcs to keep them at bay. His back was against the lift doors. He spread out his arms for leverage and kicked a zombie away. He heard a clang as the lift platform arrived. He backed into the lift, his scrambling fingers stretching to hit the button for the lift doors. They began to slide shut.

He drove both knives forward, which sank into the melee. A zombie's arm thrust through the gap, jamming the doors.

Callinca grabbed it and wrenched it from the socket. The doors shut and Callinca began to ascend.

Exhausted, he slumped to the floor. Mindful of the risk of more vomit chunks eating through his helmet, he took it off. For a moment he wondered how close it had been to eating through to his brain. Pain bore through his face. The sound of bolter fire had stopped. Callinca lifted himself unsteadily to his feet. He had no weapons. His hand hovered over his servo arm and the one piece of equipment he had left. All he could do was brace himself for what lay in wait on the other side of the lift. Althulca and Nibus were either dead, or had managed to clear the area. Callinca stood with his back pressed against the far wall of the lift. The lift ground to a halt.

The doors opened.



THIS VENTILATION shaft leads to the ship's logic array,' said the chaplain. The Marines followed him in. It was the first of two, which would lead them to the heart of the ship's guidance system. The surroundings were cramped but so far clear of the living dead. A grate at the other end was in sight. As they approached, they could hear the sound of loud chewing.

Reaching the end of the shaft, Vidus crouched down and peered out and saw a corridor with five zombies down on all fours. They were on top of something, but he couldn't see what it was. Vidus thumped his bolter against the grate and sent it clattering to the floor. He followed it down, landing in a crouch with his gun ready.

Vidus had disturbed the zombies from their meal and they all looked in his direction. It was a recent kill. Both of the victim's arms had been gnawed off, but the uneven bites into his torso and chest were still fresh. A rib stuck out of a cavity. The corpse had no eyes and little in the way of a face, but Vidus could fit together

the agonised expression of the victim – he surmised that the zombies had set about him while he was still alive.

The zombies advanced on him. Vidus remained crouched and carefully shot each of their kneecaps in rapid succession. As they collapsed onto the ruined cartilage of their knees, Vidus put a shell through their heads for good measure.

Captain Torrus and the others dropped down from the shaft. Torrus kicked a zombie corpse to the side. 'Good work,' he told Vidus.

They looked at the t-junction at the end of the corridor forty metres away. This was where the second ventilation shaft was. 'Let's move,' Torrus said.

'What's that?' The iciness in Makindlus's voice stopped them in their tracks. They all heard a noise which sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping down metal sheets. Shota put his hands to his ears and silently mouthed a prayer.

Looming shadows, full of movement, were cast against the walls. Lured by the sound of Vidus's gunfire, abomination after abomination appeared from around both corners. Arms stretched, crooked, grotesque faces set in blood lust, twisted feet bent at the ankles scraping across the floor. All former intelligence was burned away by the plague, leaving only a mindless destructive fury in the dark void that now inhabited them.

Torrus remained unconvinced by the chaplain. Equally, he was painfully aware of the lack of numbers on his side. And Shota Klos was a better bet than the advancing hordes. 'Can you handle a weapon?' he asked him.

'In the defence of the Emperor, I can do anything,' the chaplain replied.

Torrus turned to Ulcaca 'Then give the man a gun,' he said. 'A rosarius can only take you so far.'

Grunting an affirmative, Ulcaca took a laspistol from the holding brackets on his armour, which the chaplain gratefully accepted. The four Marines and the preacher formed a line, Ulcaca and Vidus taking the flanks. 'Let the divine light of the Emperor aid us and make our aim true,' the chaplain said.

'Our route lies ahead of us.' Torrus straightened his arm, aiming his plasma pistol at the approaching rabble. 'We will not surrender any ground,' he said.

The zombies were almost on them.

Makindlus threw a small cylinder into the mob. Gaseous tendrils spouted from it. It hardened into a layer of ice, rooting the advancing front line to the spot.

'A freezing agent I picked up from the molten planet Arethar,' Makindlus explained.

'Emperor be praised!' the chaplain said.

The zombies were square in Torrus's sights. 'Know your enemy and never underestimate what they are capable of,' he said.

A zombie, both legs stuck fast, ripped one of its knees free. It wasn't a clean break. A jagged shinbone was sticking through as hot streams of crude ichor squirted from the stump.

'Fire!'

The Marines cut a swathe into the leading zombies. Shells hit heads, throats and torsos – again and again. Vidus fired round after round into dead eyes and slack flesh. A thick spray of blood, bone and vomit was obscuring his view. He moved down to midribs barely a metre away from the gun muzzle. His shots tore through a half dozen rib cages at a time, and the carnage rippled and cascaded in front of him.

Balbolca's bolter created an orgy of destruction. Meeting him head-on was a wall of pus-ridden zombies, arms darting out. In their frenzy to get at him, the ones further back gnawed and tore at those in front. The Marines' fire sliced through the mob. Bits of abomination flew in the air like mud from a spinning tyre. Shards of bone flew off, embedding into other zombies. Yet still they came on. As they fell, twitching and writhing, more took their place.

A gap opened in front of the Marines and they stepped forward to fill it. For a few vital moments Ulcaca's progress was unimpeded, then a group of zombies swarmed around him. One was despatched without ceremony, its jaw flying off from the gunfire and smashing into the face of another. Two zombies got in close, and spewed their last meals. Hot

vomit flew at him from all sides, eating into his helmet's eye visors. Blinded, Ulcaca lashed out, spinning and firing wildly. Nearby, Torrus and Makindlus ducked as they found themselves in the crossfire.

Instinctively the zombies sensed the weakness in the Marines' ranks. They all converged on Ulcaca. They pummelled, punched, bit and puked, forcing their quarry to the ground.

'Ulcaca!' Vidus cried as he ran to the mob, trying to fight his way through, grabbing and shooting zombies in the head and throwing them to the floor. But from every direction they swarmed around Ulcaca.

Torrus put his hand on Vidus's shoulder. 'Stand back,' he shouted. 'Regroup!'

Torrus, Makindlus, Vidus, and the chaplain all took a step back. The chaplain uttered a quick prayer. *'Though I walk through the realm of contaminant and disease, the Emperor will lay down my head and wash me of my wounds when my time has come...'* His words were drowned out by the incessant groans of the zombie mass.

Ulcaca was lost to them. The ventilation shaft was still some feet away. 'Know your enemy and never underestimate what they are capable of,' Torrus's words came back to him. 'For Ulcaca,' he said in a low voice as the group opened fire once more.



THE FOUR MARINES stood in a tight knot. All around lay the twisted bodies of the zombies.

The bolter fire of Stellus and Balbolca combined with the purifying flamers had broken the enemy. The techmarine's men had control.

The way was clear to the logic array room. 'We must hurry!' Callinca said striding forward. As he did so he stared at the burning pyres and scorched blackened shells around him with satisfaction. Then he noticed the black slime congregating on the walls. He knew, if a reminder was needed, that it was not over yet.

Inside the control room, Callinca dropped to his knees beside the array mechanism. From his servo arm he took a screwdriver and removed the array plate. Sweat from his brow leaked into his eyes and face wounds. The pain was fierce and relentless. Examining the array's insides, he could see the prerequisite cogs, transistors and wires that relayed instructions to the engines and propelled *The Deliverance* forward.

'I'm out of explosives. I had to use the charges,' Callinca said. Stellus aimed his gun. 'No, that won't do, either.'

Suddenly the grate from the array room ventilation shaft fell with a clatter. Flamers and bolters immediately went up, aiming at the shaft. 'Kill anything that moves,' Callinca ordered.

Rather than the expected deluge of corpulent flesh, a single, small item fell to the deck. Callinca recognised it immediately.

'It's a rosarius. Hold your fire!' Callinca said.

A voice came from the grate. 'Excuse the theatrics, but with the array so close, we had to be sure.' The head of Captain Torrus appeared. The squad dropped down into the room.

Torrus watched on as Callinca stuck his hand into the array and pulled out a handful of circuitry. The logic array shorted out.

Callinca looked up to the captain. 'Consider the array out of commission. The zombies will never be able to repair it.'

'Good work,' Torrus said.



AS MAKINDLUS tended to Callinca's injuries, Torrus briefed the reunited squads.

'I had *The Mournful Passage* back on line, though only fleetingly. This damned interference seems to be following us around. In the prevailing conditions we cannot teleport back to the ship. The back-up plan is to reach the landing bay where a Thunderhawk will pick us up. We have to cover another kilometre.'

The Marines exchanged glances. Makindlus grunted and said, 'I like a challenge.'

The chaplain stared at the spooled wires of the array, which resembled the innards of some sacrificial animal. He placed his hand on the wall nearest to him and gathered his breath. He smiled contentedly. 'I am certain of the arch-enemy's displeasure,' he said before contorting into a coughing fit.

Every weapon in the room instantly drew a bead on him.

'Chaplain!' Torrus barked.

'Please. All this running and fighting. I just need a little time to catch my breath. I am not becoming one of them.'

None of the Marines as much as flinched.

'Perhaps not, but all the evidence suggests that eventually you will. Why should we take the chance that when you finally succumb you take one of us with you?' Torrus stepped towards the chaplain and placed the muzzle of his bolt pistol square against his temple. In response, Klos placed his rosarius to his lips, kissed it and began to recite a litany of faith.

There was an awkward pause filled only by the clear, high Gothic enunciations of the chaplain.

Torrus imagined pulling the trigger. He knew it was the correct thing to do. No, not the correct thing, the prudent thing. Yet this man, this faithful, pious man had given him no cause to question his actions. He holstered his pistol.

'The Emperor protects,' said Torrus.

'The Emperor protects,' the chaplain repeated.

The tension in the room dissipated.

'I can lead you to the landing bay,' the chaplain said looking up at hulking, armour-clad figure of the Doom Eagle captain.

'Please proceed.'



IT TOOK TWENTY minutes for the band to reach the vast doors that led into the landing bay. Resistance on the way had been light. The squad had split up and Callinca's group were several levels up from the docking level floor where the local generator was situated. With the logic array down, the generator had to be activated manually before the hangar doors could be opened. Callinca had his damaged helmet on. The vox link was back on-line. He contacted Torrus. 'Generator on,' he said.

Torrus was standing by the doors. They were airtight so no sound could be heard from the other side. The Marines were standing back, weapons primed, ready to deal with whatever they may find on the other side. 'Understood,' he said. 'Opening the doors now.'

Callinca took a step back as the hangar doors on his level ground slowly open in front of him.

His comms link vibrated into life once more. 'We have increased zombie activity here,' Torrus shouted above the growing interference. 'I suggest you find another way down to the landing bay.' There followed a long whine of static. Callinca turned it off.

Something dripped onto Stellus's shoulder. Instinctively, he swiped at it with his hand. He looked down and saw black slime. Callinca and the others stalked onto the gantry. Ahead were metal stairs leading down to the bay floor, far below.

On either side of the landing bay there were Imperial Guard drop-ships, stacked one upon the other like giant eggs waiting to hatch. They stretched as far as the Marines could see. Callinca spotted Torrus's group below walking down a ramp towards the landing bay.

It was then that Callinca saw them. Emerging from their drop-ship mausoleums was the Imperial Guard, now surrendered to the filth spoor contagion of Chaos. An entire regiment was advancing out to meet them.

Zombies began dropping down from above, and enough were finding a hold on the gantry. Some still carried their lasrifles and they began to smash the butts onto Callinca's armour. Callinca blocked a blow

with his arm before pushing two abominations off the gantry.

'Down!' screamed Balbolca as he unloaded his bolter both to his left and right. Zombies were knocked off in a shower of burst blood vessels and exploded cartilage. But more tumbled from the higher stacked drop-ships to replace them. Abominations, hands flailing, smashed repeatedly into the Marines. Callinca was doing all he could to stay on the gantry, and Stellus lost his footing.

'No!' yelled Callinca. The ends of his fingers grazed Stellus's outstretched hand, but he was too late. Stellus fell, taking a dozen scratching zombies with him. On the ground, a hundred grasping and grabbing corpulent hands stretched out in wait.

Callinca's head was forced back, he hung over the gantry, many hands gripping his helmet; the muscles in his neck were grinding, feeling immersed in fire. There was a rushing noise in his ears.

The Thunderhawk streaked into the landing bay. It pulled up and hovered below the gantry not more than twenty metres away. Callinca knew he had one chance. A zombie scrambled on top of him, a half eaten tongue trying to force its way through the holes in his helmet. He had to dig deep, one more momentous superhuman effort. He lifted his head and looked defiantly into the pock marked face before him. He grabbed its hair and snapped its head back with sufficient force to break the neck bone and threw its lifeless husk over his head, snagging other zombies and pulling them down with it. He jumped to his feet and shattered a zombie's arm to get to its lasrifle. Next to him was a mound of putrid squirming flesh. He fired the lasrifle into the writhing bodies until there was no power left, then put his hand into the heap, and pulled out Balbolca.

'One chance, Balbolca.' The Marines stood at the edge. Zombies swarmed around them looking to drag them back. 'We're in the hands of the Emperor, now.'

They both fell, and landed on the Thunderhawk with a thud. Zombies followed them down. Both Marines scrambled towards the hatch, kicking abominations away as they went. A fellow Doom Eagle appeared from the hatch to pull them in. Diseased hands lunged for and caught Balbolca's trailing foot; he wrenched it free.

Callinca and Balbolca were safe inside. Callinca could feel the Thunderhawk turning. He ran to the pilot. 'There are more of us down there!'

A procession of zombies dropped down from the upper hangars. The pilot was struggling to keep control of the ship and he shouted above the static, which flooded his comms link. The view from the cockpit was completely obscured by a blanket of thrashing, half-crushed diseased bodies. 'They are playing havoc with our instruments,' the pilot said. 'If we land the ship, we'll never get her back up again!'

The Thunderhawk dipped. 'We have no option but to blast free while we can!'

Callinca, accepting the inevitable, closed his eyes. 'It is the Doom Eagles' way. Dead or alive, we do not leave behind our own. Let the Emperor give witness that I will be at the front of the relief force. That I will return!'

Below, Torrus and his group had formed a tight circle. The flamers had kept the hordes at bay, but there were thousands of zombies pushing in, more than enough to snuff out even their brand of firepower. 'Arm and make ready,' Torrus told his men. 'Ammo is low, so choose your targets well. Cleanse as many of the abominations as we can.'

The chaplain mouthed a silent prayer. He'd fought alongside the Marines with great courage. He was the only one out of a hundred thousand personnel on *The Deliverance* who did not succumb to the plague.

'I should never have doubted you,' Torrus told him.

'I remember no doubt,' the chaplain said. 'Only a selfless devotion to the Emperor.'

'The Emperor have mercy on us.'

The Thunderhawk came into view. It was barely thirty metres above them. Plague zombies, caught in the engines, fell, engulfed in fire. But still the horde continued to pile on, trying to drag the flyer down. It was an awesome demonstration of strength in numbers. The Marines were being smothered on the ground and above.

Torrus willed the flyer on. It didn't matter if vox contact was down, he yelled into his comms link anyway, 'Go! For pity's sake, go!'

As if in answer, the Thunderhawk roared its thrusters, and was gone.



THE FORCE OF the blast from the Thunderhawk's thrusters swept the writhing mass of zombies from the ramp. Torrus saw the opportunity.

'Fall back! Head for the ramp!' he yelled.

With Torrus laying down a screen of covering fire, his battle-brothers and the chaplain darted across to the base of the ramp, all five figures slipping and skidding in the thick layer of gore that now coated the hangar floor. Once they had disappeared from view through the doorway at the top of the ramp, Torrus himself made his way to join them, still blasting away with his bolter as he did so. Two zombies dropped down from the gantry above, impeding his progress. The first he shot through the face, the second – realising that his bolt pistol was now out of ammo – he despatched with a swift motion of his left arm. The zombie's head rolled satisfyingly down the ramp.

'Problems?' Nibus said as his captain emerged through the doorway into a hold stacked from floor to ceiling with crates. All of them bore the mark of the Imperial eagle.

'Nothing I couldn't deal with. I am out of ammo though,' Torrus said somewhat dejectedly, wiping pieces of zombie from his armour.

'I don't think we need to worry too much about that,' said Klos. Torrus turned to face the chaplain who was now standing before him with a gleaming lasrifle in his hands. 'This is a holding area where the arms and munitions are stored before loading onto the drop-pods.' The chaplain thrust a power cell into the rifle and handed it to the Doom Eagle.

'The Emperor truly protects,' Torrus said, the hint of a smile appearing at the corners of his mouth. 'It will be at least a week until our comrades arrive in sufficient numbers to cleanse this transporter. There must be a thousand crates in here. A thousand last stands.'

The chaplain kissed his rosarius before placing it in his side pocket. 'Then we must give a thousand thanks to the Emperor.'

A mob of plague zombies hove into view. A thrashing mob of rifle butts, vomit, teeth and nails swayed towards them. Long days and nights lay ahead. Not all, if any, would survive the relentless onslaught. Still, they – the chaplain, Brothers Vidus, Althulca and Nibus and Makindlus – aimed and waited for the order. Captain Torrus breathed deeply.

He gave the command. 'Fire!'



Two weeks later

REINFORCEMENTS HAD arrived. The cleansing and quarantine of *The Deliverance* had begun in earnest. Squads of Doom Eagles and Imperial Guardsmen moved in stages through the ship burning it clean of zombies and Chaos slime. All squads advanced on the landing bay for the final reckoning. There they would find Plague Zombies disorientated and ineffective as a fighting force. This tactic of methodically hacking away at the influence of Chaos throughout the ship was having the desired result.

True to his vow Callinca was a prominent part of operations in the storage sectors. His familiarity with the

area was proving invaluable, but there was another reason he was there. He would be the first to be informed if and when the bodies of Torrus and the others were found. This was his anointed responsibility, earned through fighting with them side by side, to ensure that the correct protocols were followed to guarantee his dead comrades full heroes honours back on their home planet of Gathis II. It was the Doom Eagles way. It was Callinca's way.

All was quiet. Callinca's squad walked past the personnel lift in the medical storage area. Imagery, both vivid and dark, came flooding back to the techmarine. There was the debris caused by the charges, the scattered zombie parts, but that which remained of the zombie mob that besieged him had moved on.

Sound rang in Callinca's ears. The rattle of las-fire resonating desperation, a last stand against impossible odds. Perhaps too vivid a flashback, Callinca thought to himself. Then, the register of shock and a glimmer of hope etched on Callinca's chiselled face as he recognised the sound of battle as real and in the distance.

Callinca's squad followed him as he ran past the opened shutters into the next storage area. There were crates that had been kicked over, with munitions inside. Thoughts raced through Callinca's mind. There were no other squads down here and the zombies didn't have the nous to fire a lasrifle. Callinca followed a trail of dead zombies and open crates. Surely, it could only mean one thing...

At the far wall their backs to Callinca's squad – a mob of very much alive zombies. From the other side, there was definite gunfire.

'Take them down,' Callinca said. The squad's flamers combined to unleash a fireball that engulfed the zombie mob. Those that turned around were picked off with consummate ease. The zombies combusted and peeled away to reveal a group of crates used as cover. Behind the crates were Torrus, Makindlus and Balbolca. All of them were badly beaten, with burns and missing fingers. Makindlus had lost most of his right arm.

He fell to his knees with exhaustion. The apothecary from Callinca's squad ran to his aid. 'From one apothecary to another,' Makindlus said, 'if I prove to be a bad patient, you have my permission to shoot me.'

'I wasn't planning on asking your permission,' the apothecary said. Makindlus smiled at this, his eyes flickering, turned heavy. He allowed the notion of sleep to flood his thoughts for the first in a very long time.

'You are the only survivors?' Callinca asked Torrus as he helped the captain to his feet.

'When it left the landing bay, the blast from the Thunderhawk's thrusters cleared a lot of the zombies from around us,' Torrus told him. 'With the Thunderhawk gone, we escaped back up the ramp and set base here. Long days and nights. We'd fight them off, change position, emptying crates of lasrifles and power packs.'

'And the chaplain...?' Callinca asked.

Torrus stared into Callinca's eyes. There was still defiance in Torrus's gaze; there was still fight. 'It was several hours ago. The zombies had outflanked us. The chaplain, lasrifle blazing, took them head on, punching a hole through enemy lines, but it left him isolated. Cut off from the rest of us.' Torrus looked away in case his eyes betrayed another emotion. 'He gave us the chance to regroup and rescue the situation. He sacrificed himself.'

'Just moments before, he passed something to me,' Torrus continued. The captain was holding tight an object in his three-fingered hand. 'He fought alongside us with the courage of a Doom Eagle. The only one out of a hundred thousand personnel on this transporter ship who did not succumb to the plague.'

Callinca saw what Torrus had in his grip and understood. They had all been party to it. It was more than a fight for survival; it was all about faith.

'We had to survive,' Torrus said. 'Our obligation, his legacy.' It was the chaplain's rosarius that Torrus held in his hand. ♡

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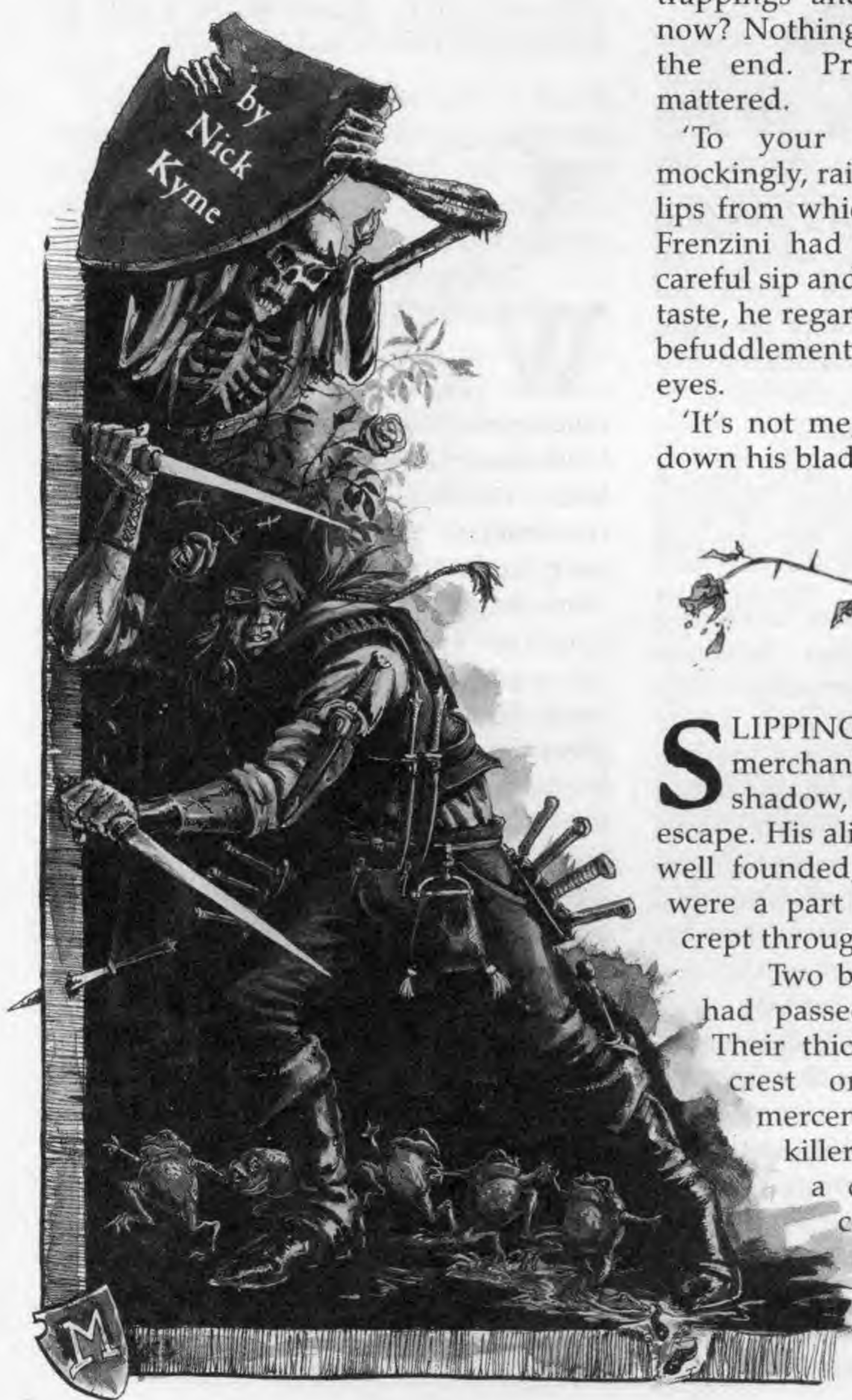
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The Perfect Assassin



RANNICK WITHDREW his rapier from the quivering body of Frenzini Lucrezza with satisfying ease. As he wiped the long, slender blade upon the merchant's silken shirts, which bulged from his swollen girth, his prey looked on pleadingly with dying eyes.

Within the merchant's inner-sanctum, a cluttered but opulent domicile awash with a faint veneer of burnished gold, Rannick allowed himself a smile.

He was the finest assassin in all of Luccini, even Tilea, and Frenzini had learnt that to his cost. What were all his trappings and gilt possessions worth now? Nothing. Everything was dust in the end. Prestige; that was what mattered.

'To your health,' Rannick said mockingly, raising a gilded goblet to his lips from which, only moments before, Frenzini had been supping. Taking a careful sip and savouring the wonderful taste, he regarded the merchant's dying befuddlement with cold, unemotional eyes.

'It's not me,' he stated, and brought down his blade.



SLIPPING THROUGH the merchant's mansion house like a shadow, Rannick made a silent escape. His alias, the Living Shade, was well founded, for he moved as if he were a part of the murky dark that crept through the windows.

Two bodies lay ahead; Rannick had passed them on the way in. Their thick metal armour bore no crest or insignia; they were mercenaries, well armed, trained killers. Now they grew cold in a dead merchant's trophy corridor, the stark marble stained with blood that welled from their eyes, ears and mouths. The tiny darts protruding

from their soft necks bore a deadly and agonizing poison. Fast acting, they hadn't even have time to scream.

The guards were gone, a forgotten memory as Rannick sped on. The corridor was long, designed to impress guests and traders with its opulence. All manner of superb finery from numerous far-flung continents sped past in an blur. It would've been easy to stop, even slow momentarily, and grasp a small trinket to augment the fee. But it went against the code, the doctrine by which all assassins live by.

Assassin's Code #32: Always agree your fee beforehand and never waver from it. Unexpected 'difficulties' can arise from padding...

Out into the grounds and a thick frost crunched underfoot, a white veil overlayed the luxuriant vista of marblesque towers and finely wrought garden fountains. In the chill silence of a Tilean winter night, a gong sounded.

Frenzini had been discovered.

The peal of the bell rang out a resonant warning; the sound clung to Rannick's ear drums as he slipped through the night.

Great arboreal structures depicting griffons, pegasi and other fabulous beasts loomed high and menacing in the midnight gloom. Dusted with white powder they took on an eldritch quality against the pale moon as Rannick darted through them. At the end of a gravel path and secreted within a frost tinged bush Rannick found the rope and grapple he had hidden there for his escape.

Booted feet tramped heavily over stone walkways beyond and above him, and shouts carried loudly through the windless night.

Rannick shut away the noise. Low and stealthy, his lithe, muscled body blended with the night. He glanced back to check on his pursuers.

A band of three had gathered, two with swords, a third with a crossbow. They stood upon a high balcony, lost in

confusion, impotent with undisguised fear of the dark. It had come alive and slipped into their master's impregnable fortress with silent menace and left him dead.

The grapple found purchase almost silently. Rannick tested the strength of the hold and scaled the wall to the stone walkway above.

He surprised a guard who patrolled above. The guard fumbled with a half-drawn sword as the dark apparition slipped past him. He tried to choke a warning as the assassin slipped over the wall and into the gloom below, before he realised his throat had been slit.



WITHIN THE labyrinthine streets, alleys and forgotten plazas of Luccini, Rannick made good his escape.

He was pleased. Frenzini's retirement had unfolded as planned. The commotion, when combined with the sheer audacity of the attack would send shivers down the spines of his employer's rivals.

A mercantile war was being waged, more like a state of perpetual conflict given Tilea's fractious nature, and the Living Shade was a ready tool for one of the most powerful merchant houses staking its claim.

Rannick negotiated vast twisting pathways, shrouded in sibilant, crawling shadows.

He came to a dead end, stark in the wan glow of silver moonlight. He stepped forward and shed the darkness. It was here that Rannick found what he was looking for.

A set of crates and fire-baked urns, rich tan turned sickly pink in the light, sat against the alley walls. They cunningly obscured a small door sunk deep into terracotta. A world lay beyond, subterranean and sworn into

death-threatened secrecy. A clandestine knock: three raps, a pause, two more and then a sixth and the Living Shade was admitted into the dark where his fee awaited.



A LONG, DANK corridor stretched before him, the entry guard evaporating into the blackness, as Rannick padded quickly down stone steps.

A hundred broad steps and a flame flared at the end of the tunnel. Rannick stepped through the light into a vast and impressive hall, the Assassin's Guild, an organisation more valuable than the very throne of Tilea itself.

'Rannick!' a voice cried from a vast throng of cloaked and mysterious figures, weapon smiths, poison makers, engineers and more. Here men and dwarfs convened in a hive of subdued and secretive activity that bustled below the few remaining steps to the hall.

Rannick keenly picked out his man and for the first time that night, drew back his hood.

Deep brown eyes flashed bright in the fire light as he pushed back a swathe of dark, luxuriant hair from his tanned and well-defined face. Rannick paused a moment, allowing his man to come to him, privately basking in the imagined glory of his own countenance. Not only was he the best, he was the most handsome as well.

'Rannick,' the man repeated, slightly out of breath. He was short, a mere dwarf compared to Rannick's own impressive stature, and advanced in years. A balding pate held obvious traces of grey around the temples and above the ears. Remy was his accountant.

'Frenzini has been retired,' Rannick stated coldly with a hint of suave, self-confidence. He strode down the steps,

regarding his colleagues imperiously, removing his black gloves and slapping them, without looking, into Remy's outstretched hands.

'Excellent,' Remy acknowledged, skipping a little to keep pace. 'I will have the gold in your treasury by the morning,' he assured him.

'See that it is,' Rannick ordered, striding through the mass. 'You have my next contract.' It was more of a statement than a question.

'We need to talk about something first,' Remy warned tentatively.

'Business first, Remy.'

'Yes but...'

'Business.' Rannick turned and fixed Remy with an icy stare. 'I didn't attain the mantle of best assassin in all of Luccini by being distracted by details.'

'No, sir,' Remy conceded, a little uneasily. A speech was coming.

'I have retired public figures, merchant leaders, politicians, warlords and barons. I have travelled beyond these shores, fought in the mercenary legions of Lorenzo Lupo, slain the orc chieftain Grushult Bonesneer and even had an audience with the arch-poison mistress Lucrezia Belladonna herself, have I not?'

Assassin's Code #62: Never extol the virtues of your own skill and undertakings. Weakness can be derived from such knowledge, particularly when said plaudits are embellished or false.

'Indeed sir, my humble apologies.'

Satisfied, Rannick continued. There was a large board ahead, set at the very back of the voluminous hall. It was adorned with all manner of contracts, wanted posters and death notices. Each had an artist's impression of the mark or the deceased as well as a scribed report as to the contract's status.

'Busy night,' Rannick remarked sarcastically to a thinning, bespectacled man working from sketches within a wooden partition. He glared daggers before returning to his furious scribbles.

Rannick knew him. He was Callini Faust, known simply as 'The Artist'. He killed his victims with a sharpened quill filled with poison ink before drawing their dead bodies with their own blood off the murder weapon. If business was slow he worked a sideline as a contract artist.

'He's been scribing for the past four nights,' Remy told him.

'Four?' Rannick turned again. 'What of the regular employers?'

Assassin's Code #2: In Tilea, somebody always wants somebody else dead.

'That's what I need to talk to you about sir.' Subconsciously Remy recoiled, awaiting the backlash.

Rannick's eyes narrowed. He bid Remy to go on.

'The regular contracts,' he said, faltering, swallowing back his fear, 'have all been retired.'

'All of them? Even Manlect the Obese, Merchant Prince of Sartossa!'

'Even Manlect.'

'That was my contract,' Rannick muttered. 'I only stole the plans to the manor house last night!'

'The assassin climbed to Manlect's roof, bored two tiny holes through the slats. Through the first he espied Manlect asleep on his back as is necessary for a man of such generous girth,' Remy explained. 'Through the second bore hole he extended a length of fine twine, almost invisible to the naked eye and as it was dark. He trickled a potent concoction of poison, black lotus I believe, into Manlect's snoring mouth. He was dead by morning, physicians were baffled.'

'Not without cunning,' Rannick admitted quietly, making a mental note to burn the manor house plans and crush the ashes underfoot. Rannick smiled as he imagined the head of his usurper crushed beneath his boot instead.

Assassin's Code #6: If something goes wrong always destroy all evidence of a

transaction. Any monies exchanged are fair trade for compensation.

'What about the tax-collector, Demitri Vallenheim? He's been on my books for weeks,' Rannick asked, turning back to find Demitri's contract on the board.

'Him too.'

A mask of controlled fury swept across Rannick's face.

'It is the work of one man,' Remy told him.

'One man,' he stated with frightening calm.

At least twenty new contracts had been posted over the last month; it was a busy time in the assassination business. Each and every one had been daubed over with red ink, the word 'retired' emblazoned over their portraits.

'Who?' Rannick uttered deeply.

'He's new, been in the city for six months. He's been improving his tally since he arrived.'

'Name.'

'I only know his alias. No one has ever seen him. He sends street urchins with wax-sealed envelopes to collect his contracts.'

'And the alias?'

'The Black Crowe.'

'What is his standing?'

Remy waited nervously, unwilling to answer.

Rannick turned to him with rage in his eyes.

'His standing?' he repeated.

'It rivals your own sir,' he admitted in a choked whisper.

Rannick swept his gaze across the hall to another wooden board where a rat-faced man on a rope and pulley chiselled a name near the top.

'The Black Crowe,' Rannick read with disbelief, his own name only one place above. It was a large prestigious record of an assassin's achievements. Rannick had always luxuriated in his own supremacy, his retirements always inexplicably higher than his nearest rival. Now he shared that honour with another.

For a moment Rannick was speechless.

'I tried to warn you sir,' Remy blathered.

Anger turned to self-preservation as horrified Rannick felt his crown slipping. To be the best meant something. It was not only prestigious, it was financially lucrative. Powerful, wealthy employers always requested the best. Up until now, that had been him.

'What marks are left?' he asked quickly in desperation, scanning the contracts again.

'Only one,' Remy's voice was like prophecy as he wiped sweat from his bald head. 'Count Banquo Degusta.'

Rannick held his breath and looked over at the only unretired notice on the entire board, where it had remained for the last eight months.

Count Banquo Degusta; known within the guild as the impossible mark. Seven separate attempts had been made on the man's life. All seven had failed, and as Rannick contemplated the suicidal nature of such a task, Faust pinned up an eighth with a dagger.

'Sour-fingered Krellen,' Rannick read. 'Retired by his own poison spoon.'

'Ah Krellen,' Remy sighed a wistful lament, 'he was good.'

'He was careless,' Rannick countered coldly. 'Assassin's code, article fifteen,' he quoted confidently. "'Never use another man's cutlery,'" Krellen and the Duke Bastille learnt that to their mutual demise.' He then turned on his heel and began striding back across the hall.

'Rannick?' Remy called after him, taken aback by his master's abruptness.

'I'll be at the Drowned Man inn,' he told him, walking away.

'And the count?'

Rannick paused, careful to block out the faces of the eight dead assassins.

'He's been buying up property and businesses all over Luccini and holds sway in the mercantile war. His rivals would pay handsomely for his retirement. You could name your price!' Remy urged with a wry smile.

Krellen's face flashed before Rannick; ashen pallor of the dead upon his flesh, a withered tongue protruding from his mouth.

'I will consider it,' Rannick sidestepped. 'But first I need information on this "Crowe" character,' he said, exiting hastily back into the gloom of the entrance way.



THE DROWNED MAN was a darkly mysterious taverna upon the very fringe of the market plaza of Luccini. Much like the secret entrance to the Assassin's Guild it was located through a series of clandestine passages and alleyways. Outwardly it had little to distinguish itself: dark wood and sun-bleached stone, gloomy windows with an orange tinge. A sign hung from a solitary length of rope and swung languidly in the winter breeze. It depicted a nondescript body washed up upon a barren shore. It was a fitting epitaph to those that dealt in a business concerned with the faceless dead.

Inside the gloom persisted. A perpetual pall of smoke clung to the interior even when pipes were doused and the fire smothered. Tonight though, the fire roared in an effort to banish away the cold. Suspicious faces huddled around tables and in darkened corners.

A bar rested at the far end of a crowded room, cluttered with innumerable chairs and tables. A vast quantity of bottles and urns resided behind the counter away from prying eyes. Some bore the tell-tale hue of milky jade absinthe, others the corruptive yet agonizingly addictive luminescence of warp dust-infused potions.

Two broad wings were set back from the throng, smouldering pipe weed serving as the only illumination. These areas were reserved for especially illustrious patrons. It was here that Rannick sat in silent contemplation.

He surveyed the filthy clot of thieves, beggars, urchins and mercenaries before him, raising a warming glass of Bretonnian rouge to his lips. Without realising, he had drained it and was about to order another when a name he recognised called his attention.

'That's right, twenty,' the urchin confirmed, his filth-encrusted face glowing with relish.

'All slain by the Black Crowe?' a broad looking dwarf pirate remarked. He regarded the urchin suspiciously, sucking deep on his pipe, absently scratching beneath his eye patch.

'Yes,' the urchin responded, leaping excitedly upon the table, swinging his gaze around the entire establishment.

The dwarf rested his hand upon a pistol at his belt.

'He is the greatest assassin in all of Tilea!'

He was a wretch, Rannick decided, inwardly seething at this proclamation. Bedecked in tattered rags, a second skin of dirt and street detritus smothering him, the urchin could have been any age. It mattered not; this was the link Rannick had been seeking. Through the urchin he could get to the Crowe.

'He could best even Vespero!' the urchin boasted, wavering drunkenly as he upended a few glasses, one into the mercenary dwarf's lap.

'A bold statement,' the ale-drenched dwarf said, reaching for his pistol, enraged at the urchin's undisguised amusement.

'Bold and inaccurate,' another voice said. A man, pale and severe, black beard neat and trim, moved out of one of the wings, the darkness peeling away at his approach. Clad in black, he drew a duelling sword from beneath a deep crimson cloak.

The urchin's amusement turned to sober concern as he staggered down from the table.

Rannick watched with interest.

'Enough!' a loud voice bellowed from the back of the room. A thickly muscled barkeep, tanned and weatherbeaten,

held a stout looking blunderbuss across the bar.

'Back to your seats,' he urged with menacing politeness. The blunderbuss shot could shred everything before him. Several of the patrons with minds on their own business looked nervously, pleadingly between the mouth of the gun and the trio of man, dwarf and urchin.

The dwarf raised his hand and returned to his seat with a muttered oath. The duellist disappeared silently, back into the gloom.

'And as for you,' the barkeep said, 'out!'

As if suddenly scalded, and with a last glance at the gaping maw of the blunderbuss, the urchin was gone, lost in the dark.



THE NIGHT DREW in around him, cold and silent as the urchin tramped dazedly through the streets. Snow was falling and it covered the approaching plaza with a whitening veil.

He looked up into the night and watched the flakes drift down languidly, disintegrating quickly on his alcohol warmed skin. When he looked back there was a shadow figure before him and the prick of a dagger at his neck.

'Wha...' the urchin began but was silenced when the blade was pressed harder, nearly piercing the skin.

'You work for the Black Crowe,' a voice like hardening ice told him.

'The Black Crowe? No, I—'

'This,' the voice said, a second dagger urging a filthy hand into the moonlight, 'tells me different.' A gold ring shone, its emblem picked out in sharp relief, that of a bird in flight, a crow. The urchin's skinny hand quivered with fear.

'You have only this chance to save yourself,' the voice warned. 'Where is he and what are his plans?'

Tears ploughed watery furrows through the grime on the urchin's face revealing pale, white skin beneath.

'I don't know,' he rasped, constricted by fear and the dagger at his neck. The shadow pressed harder and a ruby of blood peeled away down the blade.

'Wait!' the urchin begged, 'I have only met him once in the shadows. He said he needed eyes and ears in the city, that it was dangerous for him in the open. I was promised a generous pay and that a bird would bring instructions,' he explained with blathering speed. 'I take the note to the guild house and I send the contracts back with the bird.'

'When?' the shadow asked, increasing the blade pressure.

'All hours, he contacts me when he needs me, I swear by Taal!' he said with difficulty.

'His plans?'

'A murder,' was the urchin's choked retort, 'tonight.'

'Who?'

'Count Banquo.'

The shadow assailing him appeared to flinch, if only slightly but then composed itself.

'He will kill me for this,' the urchin sobbed, the blade released at last. He fell to his knees as if in penance, exhausted, shining with dappled sweat.

'Pray that he does,' the shadow figure replied. The night enveloped him as he retreated. In moments he was a merely a dark memory, one with the shadow.



THE WINTER WIND whipped a bleak and chilling chorus as Rannick crouched upon the barren rooftop of a lofty tenement. Through a powerful lens he espied the austere and well-fortified bastion of

Count Banquo. The lens had been gifted to him by an Empire explorer for the retirement of a persistent necromancer. An esoteric payment, it had nonetheless proved invaluable on many occasions.

Six guards patrolled the outer wall upon a circumventing walkway. They were mercenaries, possibly marksmen; a tattoo common to the principality of Miragliano upon one cheek. They held low-slung crossbows with practiced ease and watched the night with keen eyes. Two watchtowers surged high into the dark, jutting from the ochre walls like spikes. Staves that gleamed like silver blades in the moonlight were set around each. Each held a garrison of two men similarly armed. There was a single gate, wooden with iron studs bored into the timber. It was barred and set solid with a heavy lock. The guard patrol was thickest here.

The count's first mistake.

Assassin's Code #46: The strongest resistance will always stand at the obvious entrance. Attack obliquely and catch your enemy where he expects you the least.

At such a high vantage point Rannick could see right over the forbidding wall and into the grounds. It smacked of the usual flamboyant opulence enjoyed by those with privilege, but more interestingly was bereft of any guards. There were three hounds left free to wander, sleek and brutish, heavily muscled and doubtlessly vicious if no guard was willing to be amongst them. The entrance to the count's inner sanctum lay across their stalking ground up stone steps and through two marble pillars. It was decorative and held little threat of determined resistance. Rannick had found his opening.

If he was to believe the filthy urchin, and the panic in his eyes told Rannick he was, then he had little time to act. The lackey would no doubt try to get a warning to his master. He had been left alive and undamaged precisely for this purpose. How sweet it would be to sweep in and retire the count and then

watch from the shadows, the Black Crowe enraged at Rannick's audacious bid to turn the tables. And besides, the urchin's death would have gone against the code.

Assassin's Code #3: Unless it's personal, never kill someone without first agreeing a fee.

Speed now paramount, Rannick slid down the tenement with controlled urgency, landing athletically into the sheltered street below. Tall and arching domiciles, businesses and taverns cloaked his advance superbly. Rannick clung to the shadows cast by the overhead moonlight. He scampered through the winding streets until he was poised at the very threshold of the count's dominion.

The guard was re-doubled at the gate so Rannick slipped around the south-facing wall where the shadows were the deepest. Within their dark embrace he watched as the guard patrols overlapped. There was a moment when the wall was left unprotected. Rannick scaled up in a second, soundless and deadly. Upon the walkway he scurried across to the flat wall of the first watchtower. The angle would make it impossible to be seen by the marksmen above. A few more seconds and the patrolling mercenary would return. A moment to ensure his path was clear and Rannick traversed the width of the walkway and plunged into the leafy void below.

Within a thick, evergreen bush Rannick drew forth a small thin pipe from one the voluminous pockets that bedecked his blackened garb. From another pouch came three darts, made in such a way that they would not reflect any light. His keen senses told him the dogs were closing on him. His scent had alerted them that an intruder was present.

In the noiseless dark, Rannick waited.

It only took a few patient moments and a long, muscled canine loped into view. Rannick waited until he caught

sight of the other two. They were advancing toward him, long pink tongues lapping the air for scent clues, eyes pricked up alertly, bodies poised with the threat of violence.

Rannick fired. Three times, three hits, each an expert shot into the jugular, immediately affecting itself into the bloodstream. The dogs fell, slumbering almost instantly, the wolfish features made tame by sleep. Rannick could have used a deadly poison, this way his time in the mansion would be curtailed, but he took the assassin's code very seriously.

Assassin's Code #18: Killing a man by mistake is fine, but a dog... many difficulties can arise from killing a dog...

Certain that the guards could not see him, Rannick sneaked through the foliage that reminded him of Frenzini's Mansion.

Perhaps all such habitations adhered to a floor plan, he wondered briefly before speeding silently up the stone steps and beyond the marble pillars of the entrance.

As he had suspected, the door was not locked nor barred and swung open freely. Rannick allowed a wedge of moonlight to spill into the hall beyond and slipped through, closing the door behind him with an almost undetectable click.

The hallway confronting him was dark, thrown into greyish half-light by a glass domed ceiling of the vast lobby beyond. The immense room was pockmarked with marble and bronze statuettes, amongst them Borgio, the mercenary captain known as the Besieger, slain in his own bathtub, and the scientist Leonardo de Miragliano, holding aloft an alchemist's globe. There were others too: merchant princes, entrepreneurs and even a conceited likeness of the count himself, every inch the statesman. There were tapestries also, depicting ancient battles, treaties and coronations. The count was indeed a controlling factor in the mercantile

war if the trappings of his domicile were any gauge.

Rannick smiled. This contract would be both prestigious and lucrative. As he advanced slowly, heading for a large and ornately fashioned marble staircase up which he assumed would be the count's bedrooms and study, a thought occurred to him.

Where are the guards?

No dogs, no men, not even a decent alarm. This Count Banquo was arrogant indeed if he thought he only needed protection outside his little empire. Rannick imagined him as vainglorious, full of his own self-importance, unwilling perhaps to even share his vast quarters with the hired riffraff that patrolled the cold stone at his border.

'That arrogance shall prove your undoing, dear count,' Rannick whispered as he trod softly up the staircase, his padded shoes making no sound upon the chilled stone.

The mansion was immense. There had to be a hundred or so rooms, but as Rannick reached the very top of the staircase he was rewarded for his intuition. A faint wash of yellowing light was visible down a passage directly before him. A thick oaken banister ran around the platform, upon which he was standing, and several passages and portals lay along its circumference. Here was the route Rannick sought.

Tentatively Rannick edged forward down the corridor. The silence persisted, filled with the threat of discovery. Rannick ignored it, and eventually reached a closed door at the end of the corridor, a hazy blade of yellow light issuing from the crack.

Rannick pressed his ear against the door and listened hard. There was movement and muttering from beyond. It sounded distant, likely from within another corridor behind it, possibly leading to the count's private chambers. The door was off its latch and carefully Rannick eased it open a fraction so that he could peer at what was beyond.

He was right, another corridor lay before him. Shorter this time, a junction peeling off to the east and west at its terminus. A shadow was cast over the western passage, thrown by the wan lamplight set at intervals, arranged in gilt wall-mounted candelabras. Rannick slid within, hugging the right hand wall, stepping quickly up the corridor until he reached the junction.

Without breath he peered around the corner, low and cloaked by shadows. And there he was – mythical, untouchable, death warrant of assassins from across the length and breadth of Tilea, the impossible mark: the Count Banquo Degusta.

Now that he saw him, Rannick could not help but feel let down. He was a youthful man, indeed, but held no presence, no ardour and was at least a full half-head shorter than he; a man, that was all, and soon to be a dead one. Rannick wondered briefly how he could ever have lasted this long. His contemporaries had been sloppy, allowing their judgement to be clouded. Now they were dead, lives thrown away in vain to perpetuate a myth of mere flesh and blood. He would give no such quarter.

The count bumbled down the corridor towards an open door. From what Rannick could see, it appeared to be a study, a bookcase and the hint of a decanter and wine beyond. He wore a long crimson cloak with fur trim, night robes, and in his left hand held a glass of red wine. He had his back to him but Rannick was unconcerned about this. There was no honour in this act. He would not be another portrait on Faust's wall. He pulled the blowpipe from his pocket once more and this time produced a black dart with a red band at the tip.

Black venom.

His death would be slow and painful. The poison would first paralyse his vocal chords, silencing his screams then it would attack his lungs, making it feel as if he were swallowing his own blood. After the visions and the blinding pain it

would stop his heart. He would be able to feel it slow even through his agony and know the moment at which Morr had come for him.

Rannick balanced the pipe carefully between two fingers and picked out a spot on the back of the count's neck and fired. Then something happened for which Rannick had not prepared.

He missed.

Doubtlessly addled from the liquor in his bloodstream the count stumbled at the very last second, the deadly dart missing by the scantest possible distance. Instead it hit a low hung tapestry, embedding soundlessly.

Rannick shrunk back, watching as the count upended most of the wine onto a plush ivory carpet, oblivious to the fact that he had just escaped certain death but for a lucky chance!

He shuffled off, careful to avoid the spill, and slipped into the open doorway of the study. Once his back was to him again, Rannick peeled away from the darkness and trod, silently and purposefully, after the count. He wouldn't miss again.

The count busied himself with a glass and decanter within a plush looking study that held a strong aroma of lavender. It was filled with vast volumes of history, geography, art and even warfare – an impressive collection. It was almost a pity he would never read them again. Just as the count had finished filling a second glass of red wine, he felt cold steel at his neck.

Rannick had tired of waiting. Time was slipping away. The sleeping draught he had given to the hounds would soon expire. He had to retire the count and be gone before the Black Crowe could mount a counter move.

'Turn,' Rannick's voice was ice as the count faced him, shocked at the intrusion.

'I am the Living Shade, greatest assassin in all of Luccini and Tilea and I have come to kill you,' he announced.

The count's shock turned quickly to defeat as his shoulders slumped and his face fell.

'There is no escape for you,' Rannick told him, the lavender stench pricking at his nostrils. 'I'm barring the only door, it is shut tight and no guard or hound will hear you.'

'Then it ends at last,' the count sighed with resignation. 'I have survived eight assassination attempts. You are the first to breach my inner sanctum and live,' he told him and then added, 'Can I ask whom it was who ordered my execution?'

'I know not,' Rannick answered truthfully, slightly wrong-footed by the count's demeanour. He was used to crying, begging, offers of gold and jewels, even his victims soiling themselves. Not this cold-hearted pragmatism.

He had to make haste. He suspected the Black Crowe would have heard by now and would be on his way. He tensed his rapier arm and shaped for a death lunge into the count's throat.

'Wait!' the count urged.

This was more like it. Every mark was the same. They always beg.

'A final request,' the count added, 'to honour your achievement.'

That was vexing. This count was full of surprises. Rannick flicked up his rapier point slightly and nodded the Count to go on.

'To join me in a final glass of wine,' he asked calmly. 'I have heard of your exploits, that you toast your victims before the final death strike. I would be honoured if you would grant me such an indulgence.'

Rannick scrutinised the count for a moment. He was a plain looking man, not nearly as regal as his statuette in the ground floor lobby. It made him look honest. And after all he was beaten. He would have toasted him anyway. It was flattering to know that such an esteemed member of the community followed his work and held such a regard. Perhaps the count had tired of life and all its strains. That or he was mad.

'One glass,' Rannick told him, 'that one.' He pointed to that held in the count's hand.

Obligingly the count handed Rannick the glass and quickly poured another for himself.

'To your victory,' the count said.

'Indeed, and your health,' Rannick mocked, the glass almost touching his lips as a strange aroma assaulted his nostrils, faint amongst the cloying lavender.

Rannick threw the glass to the floor where it shattered violently.

'A trick,' Rannick whispered his eyes full of imperious hate. 'You hesitated. You wanted me to drink first. It is poison.'

'No, I...'

'You have failed, count!' Rannick proclaimed exultant. 'Little wonder you have ensnared so many of my trade, for you are indeed canny.' Secretly Rannick applauded him. He had gotten close. 'Now you drink,' he ordered at rapier point. It was a fitting end, poison the poisoner.

Reluctantly the count swilled back the wine, swallowing hard.

'At least you were slain by the best,' Rannick scoffed, waiting for his prey to keel over and foam at the mouth.

It didn't happen. Instead Rannick's head began to swim. He went to lunge but the rapier fell from useless fingers as he slumped unwillingly to his knees. His throat constricted, making it difficult to breathe.

'Would you like a hand?' the count offered innocuously.

Rannick saw a gold ring upon his finger, an emblem upon it, that of a bird in flight – a crow. One of the fingernails was badly chipped but now held firm like rock.

'You!' Rannick rasped. 'But how?'

'The air you breathe,' the Black Crowe explained. 'It is a slow acting poison to which this potion is the only antidote.' He indicated the wine glass. 'You triggered its container after you closed

the door to the study. It's perfectly harmless after a few more minutes,' he explained. 'Alas, it is already in your blood stream.'

'The Count Banquo is dead. I killed him months ago, an exterior contract,' he added. 'I assumed his identity so that I might watch your movements better and learn of your ways as well as reap the benefits as a major power in the mercantile war.'

Rannick looked on incredulously, powerless and enraged.

'You see, I had to draw you out and this was the bait,' he gestured to his garb and disguise. 'That and the amateur dramatics at the Drowned Man. All designed to bring you here, to bring you to me.'

The Black Crowe drew closer, mere infuriating inches from Rannick's face.

'I have your title now, through arrogance and self-inflated flattery you have let it slip,' he told him darkly, watching as the last moments of Rannick's life drained away. 'Be wary of another man's cutlery indeed. But what of his glass?' the Black Crowe smiled, standing.

'It's not personal,' he said impassively. 'Never make it personal. You were merely an obstacle.' His tone was condescending and accusatory.

Rannick clenched his teeth, tears pouring down his face as he screwed up all of his will power to speak for one last time.

'I am still the greatest assassin!' he spat through his agony.

'No, you're not,' the Black Crowe corrected. 'But very soon it won't matter what you think,' he added, 'In a few moments you'll be dead.' The Black Crowe walked away, opening the door to the study.

'Still,' he said, turning, just visible in the corner of Rannick's eye, 'my thanks for not killing the dogs.' ✎



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The bolters crashed into life and spat thick rounds into the air, bullets as big as candlepins cutting through the sky, shell cases arcing away in a glittering fountain of brass. The Lightning flashed over the bomber and the bolts raked its belly like predatory claws cutting into prey. Aves spun in the turret chair to see the stricken fighter flip over and smash straight into the ground. The airframe crumpled like paper under the impact, detonating in a yellow flash.

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The monster surged up out of the water beside the ship. It had been a whale once, but years at the bottom of the ocean, near the top of the world had changed it beyond belief. It was huge. Its soft, blubbery skin writhed with perpetual flames. It didn't have one mouth; it had three, each brimming with warped tusks and fangs.

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